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Metamorphosis

Spiritual Transformation as Response to Suffering and Trauma

by

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Nancy Carol Goddard

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

FACULTY OF NURSING

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That is at the bottom the only courage that is demanded of us: to have courage for the most strange, the most singular and the most inexplicable that we may encounter. That mankind has in this sense been cowardly has done life endless harm; the experiences that are called 'visions', the whole so-called 'spirit world', death, all those things that are so closely akin to us, have by daily parrying been so crowded out by life that the sense with which we could have grasped them are atrophied. To say nothing of God.

Rainer Maria Rilke

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled METAMORPHOSIS: Spiritual Transformation as Response to Suffering and Trauma, submitted by NANCY CAROL GODDARD in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

Dr. M. Allen

Dr. L. Douglass

Dr. P. A. Field

Dr. N. Gibson

Dr. F. Hare

Dr. J. Olson

Leslie Van Dover

Dr. L. Van Dover

Date: September 18, 2003

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to those women who have entered upon the path of suffering, survived the alchemical 'refinement by fire', and emerged from the ashes transformed, 'fully alive', as magnificent new creations…mature in spirit, ennobled by wisdom, filled with wonder, and gifted with grace…ready to begin life anew. To endure and to triumph, to transcend the ordinary *and* the extraordinary, to see the 'sacred' in others and to encounter the 'Sacred' in mystery is truly to exemplify the essence of spiritual metamorphosis.

AND

- Most especially, I wish to dedicate this thesis -

To My Mother
my ***anamchara*** (soul friend)
with whom I could always
love, laugh, learn from, lean on,
cry, complain, commiserate, or just always be myself.

You truly are one of the most spiritual women I have known!
I love you always!

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this investigation was to understand and describe the essential nature and defining characteristics of spiritual experience as lived by middle-aged and older women who had suffered and been transformed in the wake of trauma or existential crisis. Hermeneutic phenomenology was employed to analyze and synthesize nine women's narrative accounts of spiritual experience. As the analytical process proceeded, a number of recurring themes began to emerge, distil, and coalesce into six discrete thematic clusters that eventually separated further to reveal two major categories, each composed of three parallel areas of content. The six emergent themes were then labeled according to the ideas, words, and phrases of participants and a two-phase conceptual model of spiritual transformation was developed to graphically illustrate the internal meaning structure of the phenomenon and its developmental, social, and temporal contextual influences. The first phase of spiritual experience, that of *Dis*-Integration, was characterized by emotional turbulence and extreme existential anxiety (suffering) and composed of three emergent themes, including *Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection, Questioning 'Being': Wondering and Searching,* and *Turning Points: Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other'.* The second phase of spiritual experience, that of *Re*-Integration, was characterized by transcendence and personal transformation (metamorphosis) and composed of three parallel emergent themes, including *Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection, Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence,* and *Recreating and Changing Selves: Transformation.* Progressive movement from the phase of *Dis*-Integration and spiritual woundedness to the phase of *Re*-Integration and spiritual well-being was a function of numerous developmental, social, and temporal influences, as well as a deliberate decision to leave the 'old' life behind and embrace the 'new' and uncertain future. The subsequent spiritual metamorphosis introduced peace, love, contentment, joy, trust, forgiveness, and compassion into participants' lives. Implications of an increased understanding of spiritual experience for the development of nursing knowledge and for professional nursing practice are included. Finally, recommendations for future research focus primarily on the further development and testing of the conceptual model.

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I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Marion Allen, for her support, encouragement, and guidance as the chairperson of my committee. Marion has not only been an inspirational mentor but has also become a role model, colleague, and friend whose advice I will value and cherish for a lifetime. My heartfelt thanks also extend to my wonderful committee members, Dr. Peggy Anne Field, Dr. Lillian Douglass, Dr. Joanne Olson, Dr. Nancy Gibson, and Dr. Frances Hare. It would be impossible to have found greater support or a more caring, understanding, and collaborative group of women to mentor me through this arduous process. I am forever in your debt.

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Chapter One

> *Spirit is difficult to define and impossible to measure. Yet its existence has been unquestioned across the breadth of human societies. Some people describe spirit as a deep sense of belonging and connectedness. Great religions have been founded to pass on the wisdom of spiritual teachers, to create symbols and rituals as aids to worship, to develop spiritual practice and discipline. Religions help many people experience spirit and incorporate spiritual practice into their lives. But religions do not have an exclusive claim on spirit, which is present and experienced everywhere it is sought. Spirit may be experienced directly, especially by people who seek its presence through prayer and meditation, or observed in its influence on human lives. Spirit may be manifest as altruism - selfless service to others - or as love.*
>
> *(Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1993, p. 149)*

Introducing the Topic

The revival of interest in spirituality over the past decade heralds the re-emergence of a concept that was lost amidst the rising positivist science movement of the post-Enlightenment era. As the separation of science and metaphysics became a socially entrenched ideological 'certainty' (a function of the scientific revolution), the demise of spirituality, as a dimension of human nature, seemed virtually assured to 'men of science' and 'spirit' was dismissed as metaphysical nonsense. Questions and concerns of a non-material, or spiritual, nature fell within either the realm of philosophical speculation or of theological revelation; consequently, spirituality became closely aligned with religion, which was deemed by 'enlightened' individuals to be nothing more than an 'opiate' for the uneducated for more than a century. Despite the denigration of spirit by many within the scientific community in recent history, large segments of Western society continue to hold a dichotomous view of personhood as a mind-body duality, the ultimate legacy of Cartesianism. Although biophysiology and psychology have been granted primacy as the acknowledged material-immaterial aspects of human nature, spirituality is either unacknowledged as an aspect of the immaterial 'mind' or tacitly held in abeyance. The rigid pursuit of nomothetic knowledge over the past few centuries has continued unabated while potentially rich sources of idiographic knowledge that are beyond the accepted bounds of objectification and verifiability have remained untapped and unexamined. Over the past few decades, however, changes in quantum physics have revolutionized contemporary science and led to a resurgence of interest in the spiritual dimension of human 'being' and movement toward a view of individuals as dynamic, interactive energy fields, rather than biomechanical materialist entities. According to DeArteaga (as cited in Parent, 1998):

> One can note the vast difference between our hermeneutic (Christian faith-idealism) which is buttressed with the analogies of quantum physics and the hermeneutics of Christian materialism based on the science of the eighteenth century. Whereas the understanding of material science forced a radical discontinuity between spiritual activities and the material order, those discontinuities have now been evaporated. The spiritual order can now be understood to operate in harmony, not in contradiction, with the fundamental laws of the universe. The analogies between quantum physics and the spiritual life reveal a continuity of intention in the mind of the creator. God intended the universe to be spiritual - from subatomic particles to archangels. (p. 140)

Spirituality is, thus, re-emerging as an area of interest for researchers and is generally now widely accepted as a dimension of human 'being', worthy of investigation, even within the scientific community.

Human Spirituality as a Dimension of Being

Spirituality has been a well-recognized phenomenon in virtually all known human cultural and social systems, past and present, with the possible exception of the scientific era during which it was actively relegated to theology or dismissed as metaphysical nonsense. Although most would support its existence as a dimension of human nature or acknowledge its pervasive influence on human behaviour and perceptions of well-being, the scientific skepticism that has prevailed over the past centuries has prevented adequate investigation into its potential effects on health and healing. Spirit has been pushed aside to make room for a materialistic worldview that asserts the primacy of matter and suggests that all reality is ultimately explainable in physical terms. The pervasive influence of materialist philosophy has permeated all aspects of Western society, including, particularly, the health care system. According to the Institute of Noetic Sciences (1993), "The Western medical system is founded on this theory, and, consequently, there is not much room for spirit in our medicine" (p. 149). In its quest to be recognized as a professional discipline, and because of its close ties to modern medicine, nursing has also tended to focus on material values at the expense of spirit, although, perhaps, to a somewhat lesser degree. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, non-medical sources of healing and traditional ethnomedical practices have assumed greater prominence as alternative or adjunctive therapies to allopathic medicine, and the privilege once granted to reductionist ideology is gradually being eroded by more holistic philosophies. Metaphysical, ontological, and eschatological questions are once again being posed, and the quest for a spiritual dimension of human 'being' has resurfaced as an area of interest.

Although the nature of any relationship between spirituality and health presently remains speculative, the recent resurgence of interest in this phenomenon demands that such a link be more thoroughly investigated as a potential source of continued health or healing. Despite its suspected potential to enhance health and influence healing, spirituality has not generally been considered a high priority for nursing research and little is known about its precipitants, impact, development, characteristics, or substantive personal effects on human beings. Some authors have suggested that spirituality is a developmental resource that assumes greater importance as individuals age, encounter greater challenges and life conflicts, endure suffering, or as proximity to death increases (Bolen, 1996; Bruner, 1984; Copp, 1990; Dougherty, 1990; Kahn & Steeves, 1994; Reed, 1983, 1986a, 1987a, 1987b; Sims, 1987; Younger, 1995). If spirituality is indeed a resource with the potential to enhance coping or to effect changes in health and perceptions of well-being, it is critical that health care professionals understand the significance of spirituality and spiritual experience to clients and support their spiritual practices and rituals in order to fully meet the needs of their clients.

Although the importance of a spiritual dimension to human nature and personhood has been widely accepted as an element of holistic nursing practice, and despite the apparent renewed interest in spirituality within the general population in recent years, there is evidence to suggest that many nurses experience discomfort in addressing spiritual concerns in their practice or abrogate their responsibility for providing spiritual care entirely. Perhaps one reason for this apparent neglect is a lack of understanding, or misunderstanding, of what spirituality actually is. However, since holistic care connotes care of the "whole" person, spiritual concerns must be addressed along with biophysical and psychosocial concerns if nurses are to meet this holistic obligation. Consequently, enhanced understanding of the spiritual dimension, from those with personal experience of the phenomenon, may lead nurses to recognize the potential benefits of its inclusion in their nursing practice.

Genesis of the Investigation

> *As a registered nurse working in critical care, I came to wonder about spirituality from both a personal and professional perspective. While working in the Emergency department one day, a 68 year old man was brought in with a cardiac arrest. Paramedics were performing CPR, but the patient looked as if he was already dead. Apparently, his wife was with him at the dinner table when he collapsed, and no one knew for certain how long he had been without any pulse or respirations. His skin was mottled and had a 'waxy' bluish caste; he felt cool to touch and had no apparent signs of life. The code room was bustling with activity, as usual in situations like this, and the cardiac monitor showed only a straight line, with a few odd small blips from the chest compressions. This was business as usual for this department, but I remember that the atmosphere was not particularly gloomy; in fact, I recall my curiosity when one of the nurses told a joke. It seemed inappropriate in a way, but perhaps it was done to relieve the tension and, if it was, it worked because everyone laughed. We worked on this man for about 20-30 minutes, but, despite our efforts, he could not be revived. Just as the doctor was about to pronounce him, his wife arrived at the hospital and wanted to see him, so, the doctor said we should continue so she could see that we had done all we could. His wife was brought into the room and the doctor told her to go ahead and talk to him because he might still be able to hear her, since hearing is often the last sense to go. I was standing beside her as she leaned over and whispered in his ear: "I love you, 'Archie', please don't leave me. I need you. I love you. Please try, 'Archie', please...try, try for me. I love you..." Almost instantaneously, 'Archie' developed a rhythm - a heart rhythm. It was eerie. I looked around at the others in the room, and they had noticed it, too. Everyone's eyes darted around from one to another, but no one spoke. For some reason, on some level, somehow it appeared that his wife had been able to reach him, to get through to him. I heard one nurse comment to another how 'strange' this was, but nobody wanted to talk about it. Anyway, 'Archie' was stabilized and transferred to the ICU. A few days later, I took another patient over to the ICU and, to my surprise, I saw 'Archie' sitting in a chair,*

smiling and chatting with his nurse as he waited for lunch. A week later, he was discharged home.

This episode affected me deeply. I wondered about what had happened....on what level his wife was able to reach him. Was this a spiritual experience? What made him respond to her, when we had all given up? Why do some patients survive while others do not? Was it something his wife said to him? Was it anything we had done? I didn't have an opportunity to converse with 'Archie' after that experience, but I often think of him and wonder how he's doing. Is there some plane, some existence, that we don't know about, that medical science denies? Was 'Archie' aware of another place?...another time? What made him respond to his wife's whispered pleading? I was hooked. I knew that this was a dramatic event, but it piqued my interest in the spiritual dimension...and not for the first time, either. Was I just not listening? I had seen things like this before but, today, wow! I began to think about it again. I wondered what it would be like to 'know' one's spirit. What is spirituality really about, I wondered? What might it be like to have a truly spiritual experience? What would it feel like? What would it mean? Would life change because of such an experience? How would it change? Would I, as a person, be any different? I wonder, why I am here? What is the meaning of my existence?...the purpose of my life? Big questions, few answers.

The impetus for this study comes from a long-time fascination with the notion of 'spirit', or 'soul', that was stimulated by a variety of uniquely personal moments…from encountering ancient Greek mythology, from a particular and unforgettable religious experience during my teenage years, from extensive reading of philosophy and theology, and from several unexplained occurrences in clinical nursing practice. Apart from past personal experience, my knowledge of this topic is limited to selected examples of theoretical literature, anecdotal evidence from friends and acquaintances, critical reflective contemplation of my values and beliefs, and numerous nurse-patient interactions in clinical practice. My long professional experience in critical care nursing (primarily emergency and intensive care) has frequently placed me in a privileged position of witnessing acute life and death struggles and medical crises, along with their often associated intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intrafamilial conflicts. When I observe patients and families wrestling with eschatological issues or struggling with unexplainable challenges, I am reminded of the unexplained mystery of nature, the vastness and immutability of the universe, the limits of our conscious awareness, the fragility of relationships, and the vulnerability of human 'being'. I am confronted by questions of meaning and existence and I am filled with a sense of awe and wonder.

The Wonder of Meaning in Spiritual Experience: Research Question(s)

Any investigation of spiritual experience must have its origin in a sense of reverential awe and wonder about life, the universe, and one's place within it. For example, one might wonder about the nature of spirituality...of spiritual experience. One might wonder about the meaning of one's existence, with its suffering and vicissitudes of health and fortune; or, one might wonder about issues of eschatology, such as the nature of dying, death, and the existence of an afterlife. According to McColman (1997), "Wonder is the sense of being fully present with something marvelous, fascinating, admirable, or meaningful....Wonder is a doorway to higher forms of consciousness, and wonder is a key to a life fully and deeply lived" (p. 38). To wonder about the nature of spirit is to be open to the possibility of some new and unexpected source of meaning in life. What *is* spirituality anyway? What is a spiritual experience?...a peak experience? What is the meaning of spiritual experience? What is it like to really experience one's spirit? What are the characteristics of spiritual experience? How are spiritual experiences manifested? How does having a spiritual experience change a person? What are 'experiences of meaning'? What is the purpose of life? Why are we here? To wonder about spirituality is to wonder about the nature of identity, of personhood, of 'self' and one's place in the universe.

Much of my personal experience, and many of the client experiences I witnessed in clinical practice, occurred in situations of extreme existential stress; consequently, it seemed appropriate that individuals who had undergone situations of extreme stress and/or major life transitions be included as the primary participants in this investigation. Additionally, to further increase the credibility of this research project and avoid undue dilution of the findings, it was also important to limit this study to a relatively homogeneous group of participants. In order to increase my sensitivity to the stories I expected to encounter from the participants, and because of my personal questing in this area, the group of individuals chosen for this study was narrowed to include only middle-aged women who had experienced a major critical life event. Therefore, the primary question used to guide this investigation of the phenomenon of human spirituality was: "*What is* *the nature of spiritual experience, as described by women who have had profoundly meaningful life-altering experiences?"* These experiences of the spirit may have occurred spontaneously and/or following personal crises, traumatic life events, major transformational loss or change, or impending death of oneself or a loved one. This question has many related sub-questions that served as a framework for exploring spiritual experiences, including:

1. What was the experience like? What were its characteristics?...its manifestations? Where and under what circumstances did this experience of the spirit take place?
2. How did the experience affect the individual? Were there changes in the person's beliefs, values, or attitudes toward life or death as a result of the experience?
3. How is the spiritual experience talked about with others? Were there any significant perceived changes in health or sense of well-being after the spiritual experience?
4. What was it about the experience that made it be labeled as spiritual? What was the meaning that was ascribed to the experience?
5. What does one do (behaviours, activities, rituals) to nurture one's spirit?...to preserve one's sense of spirituality?

Reviewing the Literature: Dimensions of Spirituality

Literature provides a veritable treasury of textual resources for researchers involved in hermeneutical and/or phenomenological studies. Although some authors suggest that an in-depth literature review should be avoided to prevent prejudgments or presumptive categorization, others suggest that familiarity with the extant knowledge of the chosen research subject area will help to sensitize an investigator to potentially significant aspects of the phenomenon of study that could easily be overlooked or might require additional exploration (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Morse & Field, 1995). Familiarity with the literature often permits an investigator to establish some boundaries for the research study and may provide valuable support for emerging themes, thereby contributing to the production of a "rich" phenomenological text. However, when conducting a literature review, the investigator must remain constantly vigilant to ensure that the inherent literary categorizations are not superimposed on the participants' experiences. Furthermore, an examination of historical and contemporary literature may lead to the development of more fundamental questions related to the phenomenon of interest and may induce the investigator to pose secondary questions that reflect on the initial research question. For example, many authors have suggested that existential crises, such as major life transitions, suffering, or impending death, have the capacity to initiate or to inhibit spiritual development (Bowker, 1970; Frankl, 1959; Reed, 1983, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a), leading one to wonder if spirituality is able to develop only in adversity, or if it can occur spontaneously in situations of health and well-being. Or one might wonder whether life changes resulting from spiritual experiences are permanent or merely transient, or whether change will continue if the perceived threat or adverse circumstances are resolved or removed. One might also wonder if spiritual development is primarily attitudinal or whether it translates into behavioural manifestations. Consequently, a review of historical and contemporary literature must be considered a prudent prerequisite or adjunctive strategy for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. The primary precautionary point for phenomenological researchers undertaking a preliminary literature review, however, is that classificatory schemes revealed by the extant literature pertaining to the phenomenon must be held in abeyance or remain subjugate to the inductive process of discovery that is requisite for protocol analysis.

Holism as a Central Tenet of Professional Nursing

Nursing has traditionally held holism to be a central and indispensable disciplinary tenet and considered spirituality to be an essential element of human beings and a core component of humanistic nursing care. While proponents of holistic care frequently describe individuals as biopsychosocial and spiritual beings, spirituality is rarely addressed, at least explicitly, in clinical practice, as has been widely documented (Fish & Shelly, 1978; Forbis, 1988; Hamner, 1990; Highfield & Cason, 1983; Hungelmann, Kenkel-Rossi, Klassen, & Stollenwerk, 1985; Neuberger, 1998; Narayanasamy, 1993). The concept of holistic care, although a deeply entrenched value of the nursing discipline, generally signifies biological, psychological, and social unity and often appears to exclude the spiritual dimension. Numerous plausible explanations have been advanced for this apparent exclusionary oversight, including an inability to recognize spiritual issues

(Highfield & Cason, 1983), the inadequate preparation of nursing practitioners to address spiritual concerns (Fish & Shelly, 1978; Hamner, 1990; Narayanasamy, 1993), feelings of vulnerability from unresolved personal spiritual issues (Forbis, 1988), a general discomfort with metaphysical concepts due to contemporary social values that emphasize material superiority (Burnard, 1987; McSherry & Draper, 1998), or reluctance to explore intimate personal experiences, such as spirituality (Forbis, 1988). Nevertheless, evidence exists that health is positively influenced when spiritual well-being is promoted (Dickinson, 1975; Reed, 1987a, 1987b; Renetzky, 1979).

Despite its adamant proclamations of holism as a central disciplinary tenet, nursing too often provides only lip-service to the spiritual dimension of its service recipients, focusing instead on the biophysical and psychosocial dimensions of personhood. Yet, this practice is antithetical to the very idea of holism. Holism is a philosophy of health that emphasizes the continuous interaction of all aspects of human nature, including biological, psychological, sociocultural, and spiritual dimensions of being. Together, these elements interact synergistically to create a unified whole (person) that is different and greater than the simple aggregation of individual dimensional attributes. Also, because the whole (person) is situated within a specific context (environment), the whole can only be understood within its nexus of relationships (the person-environment interaction). Since holistic care connotes care of the *whole* person, each of the four dimensions of human nature (biophysical, psychological, social, and spiritual) must be addressed concomitantly by health care professionals.

According to Pelletier (1977), holistic philosophies dictate that clinicians use an integrated, psychosomatic approach to treat the 'whole' person, that every person is a unique, complex being who must share the responsibility for his or her own healing, that illness is a creative opportunity for expanding self-awareness and is not exclusively the province of orthodox medicine, and that self-awareness is critical for all health care practitioners. Proponents of holistic health care often describe individuals as complexes of physical, psychological, social, and spiritual elements and, notwithstanding the paradoxical use of reductionist terminology, include spirituality as a valued dimension of human nature. Yet, although the biological, psychological, and social dimensions have been well delineated, the spiritual dimension remains poorly understood and is often identified as a purely psychological construct; consequently, spiritual issues often continue to be overlooked by health practitioners or, if recognized, are relegated to the realm of religion. A study conducted by Highfield and Cason (1983) to determine whether nurses were able to discern spiritual cues demonstrated that most nurses were unable to clearly distinguish between indicators of spiritual health and those of psychosocial health. Similarly, the inability of nurses and allied health professionals to differentiate between spirituality and religiosity is also evident in their disciplinary literature and the two terms are often used interchangeably (Burkhardt, 1989; DeCrane, 1994; Duke & Brown, 1979; Labun, 1988; Learn, 1993; Trice, 1990; Widerquist, 1991). Such conceptual ambiguity further contributes to the continued neglect of spiritual dimensionality in health care disciplines and leads to speculation that spirituality can only be distinguished from psychology and religiosity through an increased understanding of the essential nature of spiritual experience, as identified through reflection on various individuals' accounts of personal experiences of their spirits in the aftermath of trauma or tribulation.

An additional inherent assumption of holism is that disruption of any one dimension will necessarily lead to disruption within other dimensions; therefore, it follows that a change in the balance of these dimensional relationships will enhance or adversely influence a person's health. Since holism encompasses spiritual health as a dimension of human beings, and since health care providers are committed to shared responsibility in meeting clients' health care needs, care of the human spirit becomes a moral obligation for all health care professionals. If holistic care is to remain a primary goal of professional nursing, the spiritual dimension of human beings must be explored so that its relationship to health can be clearly understood; only then can nursing be considered holistic in its approach to health, and only then can nursing meet its moral imperative.

Since the spiritual dimension of human 'being' is, then, an integral component of holistic nursing practice, its essential nature must be explicated so that its influence on health and healing can be calculated; yet, according to Ricoeur (1981), understanding must necessarily remain anterior to explanation. Therefore, the impact of spiritual experience on health and well-being, or as a mediator of healing, cannot be determined until the nature of spiritual experience is clearly understood. The purpose of this research study, then, was to reveal the essential meaning structure undergirding spiritual experience, as illustrated within the participants' narrative accounts of the phenomenon.

The importance of this study flows from the recognition that spirituality and spiritual experience are primary elements of human nature and have the capacity to influence health and healing. In order to develop a therapeutic nursing relationship and care for the 'whole' person, it is, therefore, essential to enter into a genuine, mutual, unmediated interactional relationship with the 'other' (a client or patient), since such an approach can potentially effect major life transitions (Buber, 1970). This type of direct interpersonal relationship requires an increased level of self-awareness and a personal willingness to engage with another. However, according to Buber (1970), it is only through such unconditional relational participation that a person's "spiritual substance" can mature (p. 13). Because such an encounter is, by definition, bi-directional, both participants share in the process of maturation and may benefit from an expanded sense of 'self'. Through such therapeutic encounters, nurses may become better prepared to assist others with their journeys of self-discovery and search for meaning in difficult life crisis situations.

Defining the Terms of the Investigation

An overview of nursing and other relevant literature focusing on various usages of the term 'spirituality' and its correlates was undertaken, using a variety of sources, in an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of human spirituality and to develop an appreciation for the extant body of knowledge related to the spiritual dimension of human beings. Cognates of spirituality, such as spirit, spiritual, spiritual dimension, spiritual perspective, and spiritual well being were included in this review because they are frequently interchanged in the literature.

The Dictionary of Philosophy (Runes, 1984) defines 'spirit' as "breath, life, soul, mind" and as the "animating and energizing principle of the Cosmos", and "the supersensuous, ideal order of being or realm of mind: the intellectual, rational, noetic, aesthetic, moral, holy, divine" (p. 316). The related term 'spirituality' is described as "the quality of being spiritual" and suggests that 'spiritual' involves "conscious thoughts and emotions; the mind or soul; the seat of feelings or sympathies; the incorporeal part of man"; and the "seat of the moral or religious nature" (Urdang, 1980). There appeared to be no difference between the definitions of 'spirit' and 'soul' and the two terms were often used synonymously within the literature, as in the dictionary definitions.

The etymological origin of the terms 'spirit' and 'spirituality' is derived from the Latin *spiritus* and the Greek *pneumatikos*, both of which refer to breath, wind, air, or the very principle of life (Onions, 1998; Runes, 1984; Urdang, 1980). All of the words referring to breathing (respiration, inspiration, expiration, pneumonie, etc.) contain either the Latin or Greek roots of spirit, *spirare* or *pneuma*, meaning to 'breathe' or to have life. Consequently, the human spirit is irrevocably associated with the very act of breathing; it is the vital, animating, life-giving source of human 'being'. In much of the literature surveyed, spirit and soul were used interchangeably and, as such, unless otherwise specified, there has been no attempt to differentiate between them for purposes of the ensuing discussion.

Synoptic Review of Historical Literature

From the beginning of recorded history, human beings have been concerned with various eschatological, philosophical, epistemological, and ontological questions related to the nature of 'being' and spirituality. The existence of an immortal spirit, or soul, was widely accepted across the centuries, with the possible exception, in some parts, of the scientific era. Ancient Egyptian pyramids depict scenes of preparation for a life beyond death when at least one soul (for they believed in at least two souls) would separate from the body and enter into heaven to live in glory with the perfected soul of the creator of the universe (Gregory, 1987; Rawlings, 1978). Many early Greek philosophers and followers of Pythagoras espoused a duality of body and soul, and subscribed to a doctrine of immortality and transmigration of the soul upon death, a theory also known as metempsychosis (Gregory, 1987). Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (in his early writings) all acknowledged the existence of an immaterial, immortal soul that was separate from, yet capable of interacting with, the physical body (Gregory, 1987; Plato, 1974; Runes, 1984). Plato is often characterized as having a spiritualistic perspective of life and considered one's spirit to be the source of all behaviour and morality. He believed the soul to be incorporeal and superior to the physical body and he clearly taught a doctrine of monotheism and spiritual immortality, despite the predominant polytheism of the time. The rise of Judaism in the post-Persian and Hellenistic eras, complete with its monotheistic precepts, was facilitated by Roman expansionism and challenged the ubiquitous polytheism of the period in an even broader arena, leading to an uneasy co-existence of the two worldviews as Judaism gradually extended its influence and gained in favour (Dimont, 1962). The subsequent advent and spread of Christianity further transformed the philosophical foundations of the Western world as monotheism supplanted polytheism and firmly established a position of authority for the Roman church, with its doctrines of spiritual superiority over the physical body and immortality of the soul.

Born in the fourth century, Augustine stressed that humans were composed of body and spirit and that the body existed only as a medium for the immortal soul; the physical body, then, was a temporary, inconvenient hindrance for the immaterial soul and would be discarded at death, thereby freeing the soul to reunite with God, the Highest Being (Augustine, 1990). The human spirit, according to Augustine, was the "user of the body, and the soul is the man" (p. 170). This theological position of spiritual superiority became strongly entrenched in the Christian church and held sway throughout the medieval era (Dimont, 1962). The rise of neoclassicism during the 13th century presaged a "crisis of Christian intelligence" (Pieper, 1962, p. 4) during which Greek philosophy, resurfaced by the Arab world, was introduced into the first universities. Traditional Christian teachings, including the doctrines of inferiority of the physical world and spiritual immortality, were being challenged by a Spanish physician, lawyer, and commentator on Aristotelian philosophy, Averroes, who had, according to the church, made a number of grave errors in the interpretation of Aristotle's works. Averroistic peripateticism held that the souls of men (sic) were mortal, that the world had always existed and was not created, and that all human behaviour was a matter of predestination (Petitot, 1966; Pieper, 1962; Runes, 1984). Consequently, the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy was deemed by the church to be heretical, dangerous to the soul, and a major threat to Christianity. In response to the threat, and to preserve its own religious tradition and doctrines, the established church prohibited further interpretation of Aristotle's writings.

Aquinas (1225-1274) was keenly aware of the dangers facing the Christian world as reason increasingly became opposed to faith and set out to unify Aristotelian philosophy with Christian theology and correct the errors made by Averroes. Averroes had proclaimed a 'two-fold-truth theory', also known as 'double truth', that suggested that a proposition could be philosophically true while theologically false. Aquinas countered this statement by asserting that reason could not prove anything that was contrary to faith and propounded, once again, the duality of human nature by stating that humans have both an immaterial, immortal soul and a material, corporeal body. Aquinas further posited that the spirit, devoid of matter, must require a material body to operate (Aquinas, 1947; Gregory, 1987; Pegis, 1944; Runes, 1984); he accepted Aristotle's premise that the human soul was composed of various "parts", each with its own powers, and suggested that the distinction between the parts was a function of its level of transcendence of corporeality. Aquinas further maintained that souls were created by God and upon dissolution of the physical body, the soul would return to God, its creator (Aquinas, 1947; Gregory 1987; Pegis, 1944). By challenging and countering Aristotle's final claim that the soul could not survive physical death, Aquinas reaffirmed the immateriality and immortality of the spirit and effected a satisfactory syncretism of the two diverse philosophies.

During the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries, many of the teachings of classical antiquity, including Platonic and Aristotelian thought, were again re-discovered and posed significant challenges to a Christian theology that emphasized spiritual transcendence and immortality. Although spirituality was virtually indistinguishable from theology during this period and, despite the attempted subordination of classical philosophy to Christian theology, vestiges of rationalism and anti-theistic thought persisted and laid the foundation for the scientific skepticism and subsequent materialism that developed and began to flourish during this period. Rationalism reigned, even as Descartes (1596-1650) sought to establish a rationalistic, analytic method that could be used to investigate and explain both scientific *and* metaphysical phenomena (Knoebel, 1988). Descartes posited an immaterial-material substance duality in which both substances co-existed in human beings. The immaterial, created spiritual substance was considered immeasurable and indivisible, while the physical, or material, substance was thought to be measurable and divisible and, therefore, amenable to scientific objectification (Gregory, 1987). Descartes concluded that "having a body was not part of his *essential* (emphasis added) nature" (p. 189) and that it was the soul, or spiritual substance, that was responsible for all psychic and moral functions of the body-soul complex (Runes, 1984).

With the dawning of the Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment era of the 17th and 18th centuries, the scientific revolution exploded, bringing with it a new empiricism that promised to advance the cause of human kind by subduing and controlling the physical world. The separation of immaterial (spiritual) and physical (scientific) matters, as well as the reification of reason and material science proceeded at the expense of metaphysical matters, which were often disparaged, vehemently challenged, and generally dismissed by the new science. Materialism flourished despite the development and passionate debate of numerous reactionary, oppositional arguments.

One of the reactionary standpoints, proposed by Berkeley (1734/1969), held that only immaterial spirits actually existed in reality and precluded the possible existence of any material world. Berkeley maintained that the spirit or soul of an individual alone constituted the entire 'being' or existence of the individual. He stated that "this perceiving, active being is what I call mind, spirit, soul, or myself" (p. 65) and indicated that the human spirit could only be known by its acts because of its incorporeal, indivisible, incorruptible, and immortal nature. An additional challenge to the scientific skepticism and materialism of the period can be found in the Romantic movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Romanticism had its epistemological roots in philosophy and held that intuitive, spiritual, and noumenal experiences provided legitimate data for knowledge development and focused on the characteristics of relationships between human beings and God, nature, and self. For example, Emerson, a proponent of transcendentalism and adherent of Romanticism, defined the soul or spirit as the intellect, conscience, and immortality of a person that constituted the essentializing quality, or self, of the individual (Bishop, 1964).

The brief historical review herein provided related to human spirituality across the centuries emphasizes the importance of sociohistorical events and contexts in determining the shared cultural meanings of phenomena such as spirituality, as well as the significance accorded spiritual experience. It is also evident from this review that conceptual understanding and usage of the term 'spirituality' have evolved considerably over time and form the basis of numerous diverse philosophical perspectives. Themes that were consistently found across the various historical contexts, except within some materialistic worldviews, included an emphasis on a relationship with a supernatural, or immaterial, deity, transcendence of the physical body and natural world, immanence (the creator spirit within), and 'self' as the dynamic, integrating, essentializing force, or spiritual core, of the individual.

Synoptic Review of Contemporary Literature

The radical disjunction between science and spirituality that occurred as a function of the scientific revolution of the 17th century and the subsequent prominence of logical positivist philosophy demanded that all metaphysical concerns be relegated to the domain of theology (Byrne, 1985; Duke & Brown, 1979: Garrett, 1979; Savramis, 1979) or psychology (Dettmore, 1986; Dickinson, 1975; Piles, 1990) or dismissed altogether as nonsense (Burnard, 1987).

Consequently, spirituality became closely associated with religion and the psychological dimension of human beings where it remained until relatively recently. Many 20th century philosophers remain divided by the perspectives previously outlined and there continues to be a variety of understandings of spirituality evident within contemporary literature. Consequently, most contemporary conceptualizations of spirituality are determined according to the fundamental worldview of the conceiver and often reflect dualistic, materialistic, idealistic, or realistic underpinnings that each reader must be attuned to when attempting to reach a clearer understanding of human spirituality.

According to Van Kaam (1976), a psychologist and theologian, the core of a person's self is his/her incarnate spirit. He suggests that an individual's spirit strives for self-emergence and transcendence of the flesh; the object of this transcendence is determined by one's subjective viewpoint which is influenced by culture, past experience, religion, and a socially constructed system of values and beliefs. He argues that the spirit is the dynamic force that keeps a person growing and changing and sees the individual as an essentially emergent self in the process of "becoming, transcending, or going beyond what it already has become" (p. 13). Swinburne (1986), a noted contemporary philosopher and theologian, echoes the sentiments of Emerson and ascribes physical properties to the body and mental properties to the spirit, which he considers the essential aspect of human beings. He states that "the person is the soul together with whatever, if any, body is temporarily linked to it" (p. 146).

Singer (1972), a Jungian psychologist, describes the soul as "that central guiding aspect of the unconscious, the nature of which we may have only a dim awareness" (p. 33) and claims that the soul's function is to mediate between the 'self', or one's conscious ego, and one's unconscious. Moberg (1979), a sociologist by profession, suggests a similar function for the spirit and states that spirituality serves as the focal point for all of an individual's values and inner resources; he further claims that it is "the central philosophy of life that guides conduct, and the meaning-giving center of human life which influences all individuals and social behavior" (p. 2).

Frankl (1959), a psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, describes spirituality as a process of giving meaning to one's life through creative or attitudinal values. Taylor (1992), a philosopher and metaphysician, suggests that human beings have a natural proclivity to imbue life with meaning through a unique connection to the natural world and the ability to become one with the universe. Finally, Moore (1992), a psychotherapist, former monk, and student of world religions, asserts that the soul, or spirit, is "not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance" and is not "an object of religious belief or [as] something to do with immortality" (p. 5). He adds that spiritual growth occurs in the mundane activities of daily life and emphasizes that a full-bodied spiritual life is as essential as food.

Many other contemporary authors have also revisited age-old questions regarding the epistemological origins and ontological nature of human spirituality, questions that continue to invite speculation and argumentation. Despite renewed interest in this phenomenon, little empirical research has been undertaken to date due to the challenges of objectification and verifiability associated with metaphysical phenomena. However, the resurgence of interest related to understanding human spirituality, and the emerging knowledge obtained through recent scientific enquiry, illustrates the general relevance of spirituality to the human sciences and, more specifically, to nursing. Although there continues to be some conceptual confusion and blurring of definitional boundaries between spirituality and psychology and between spirituality and religiosity, recent research and literary offerings, particularly in the disciplines of nursing and sociology, have attempted to provide greater clarity to conceptual differentiation.

Piles (1990) describes spirituality as the relationship between individuals and their God and identifies intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships as the province of the psychological dimension. This definition is in contradistinction to that provided by Vaillot (as cited in Dickinson, 1965), who claims that spirituality is more properly defined as "those forces which activate us, or the essential principle influencing us" (p. 1791). Vaillot also suggests that, while spirituality does not *necessarily* include religion, it *does* include aspects of the psychological dimension, such as interpersonal relationships. Piepgras (1968) maintains there is a relationship between spiritual and emotional concerns and asserts that spirituality is manifested *through* the psychological dimension. Donley (1991) suggests that if spiritual support were provided in conjunction *with* psychological interventions, more humane patient care would result. A research study conducted by Dettmore (1986) indicates that psychosocial knowledge and life experience are essential prerequisites to the recognition of spiritual concerns in patients. This study suggests that the ability to recognize spiritual concerns is a maturational, or developmental, process that requires personal reflection and life experience. Moberg (1979), a sociologist and researcher in the field of spiritual well-being, claims that spirituality is interwoven with all aspects of life and is manifested in *both* physical *and* psychological behaviours.

Many authors have attempted to differentiate between spirituality and religion and acknowledge that spirituality is a multidimensional concept that is broader in scope than religion, although religion *may* remain a significant element of spirituality (Arnold, 1989; Burkhardt, 1991; Colliton, 1981; Emblen, 1992; Heriot, 1992; Moberg, 1979; Oldnall, 1995; Peterson & Nelson, 1987; Salladay & McDonnell, 1989; Soeken & Carson, 1989; Trice, 1990). Stoll (1989) maintains that "spirituality is a dimension within every person – religious, atheist, or humanist" (p. 11); Broccolo (1990) concurs and states that "Everyone, including the atheist, the hedonist and the narcissist, has a spirituality" (p. 13). Renetzky (1979) asserts that spirituality is "innate and inherent in the lives of everyone, regardless of the presence or absence of theological or religious beliefs" (p. 215) and is the foundation for the physical, psychological, and social dimensions of personhood. He further states that, since meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in life are manifested through one's roles in life, the psychological and social dimensions must be embraced; also, one's will to live brings the biological dimension into play as well. Many other contemporary authors also suggest that spirituality is an essential element of human nature even though it may be denied or remain dormant (Boyd & Mast, 1989; Broccolo, 1990; Carson, 1989; Keegan, 1994; Moore, 1992; Neuman, 1989; Peck, 1993; Pierce & Hutton, 1992; Piles, 1990; Taylor, 2002; Watson, 1988; Widerquist, 1991). Fallding (1979) and Moberg (1979) claim that spirituality is a common characteristic, or shared life principle, of all human beings and state that it provides individuals with an orientation towards life and influences all aspects of living and being. Consequently, they view spirituality as a constitutive element of personhood that is indispensable to a person's essential 'self'. Keegan (1994) asserts that, although spirituality may vary in intensity at times, it is a continual yearning within every individual that seeks to connect with the eternal.

The spiritual dimension of a person's life is often viewed as the creative energy or integrating force for all the dimensions of human nature, including the biological, psychological, and social dimensions (Allen, 1991; Burkhardt & Nagai Jacobson, 1994, 2002; Burns, 1989; Byrne, 1985; Curtin, 1991; Dossey & Guzzetta, 2000; Haase, Britt, Coward, Kline Leidy, & Penn, 1992; James & James, 1991; Nagai-Jacobson & Burkhardt, 1989; Reed, 1992; Savramis, 1979; Stoll, 1979; Taylor, 2002; Walker, 1992). Others describe spirituality as the life principle (Dickinson, 1975; Dombeck & Karl, 1987; Dossey & Guzzetta, 2000; Fallding, 1979; Walker, 1992), the animating force of an individual (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Lane, 1987), and a constant, creative source of energy (Burkhardt, 1991; Neuman, 1989; Pierce & Hutton, 1992; Stuart, Deckro & Mandle, 1989; Taylor, 2002) that provides vitality and vibrancy to life (Burkhardt, 1989; Renetzky, 1979; Suart, Deckro & Mandle, 1989; Van Kaam, 1976; Williams, 1991). Emblen (1992) conducted a concept analysis of spirituality, as found within the nursing literature between 1963 and 1989, to arrive at a synthesized definition of spirituality using the most commonly employed words of various authors and a few conjunctive terms. Subsequently, Emblen defined spirituality as the "personal life principle [which] animates transcendent quality [of] relationship [with] God or god being" (p. 45). This definition focuses on a transcendent relationship with a higher being as well as a dynamic, essentializing energy or life force.

Just as within the related disciplinary literature, this animating quality is viewed as a vital force, a spiritual energy that may be related to existential or to metaphysical subjects and involves reflection, introspection, and the search for meaning or purpose in one's life. Piles (1990) states that the spirit "seeks to worship someone or something (such as God) outside one's own powers that controls and/or sustains the person especially in a time of crisis" (p. 38). Moberg (1979) describes the pervasive nature of spirituality by defining spiritual well-being:

> Its functional definition pertains to the wellness or 'health' of the totality of the inner resources of people, the ultimate concerns around which all other values are focused, the central philosophy of life that guides conduct, and the meaning-giving center of human life which influences all individuals and social behaviour. (p. 2)

Travelbee (1971) also emphasizes the importance of finding meaning in suffering and suggests that assisting individuals in this process enhances patients' spirituality. Spirituality is considered by many to be an evolutionary process wherein individuals ascribe purpose and meaning to their lives (Brooke, 1987; Carson, 1989; Donley, 1991; Heliker, 1992; Johnson, 1998; Labun, 1988; Martsolf & Mickley, 1998; Reed, 1991; Stoll, 1989; Trice, 1990).

Carson (1989), a nurse who has written extensively about the human spiritual dimension, describes spirituality as a transcendent force that connects human beings with a greater power. She contends that "spiritual knowledge is intuitive, a type of inner vision providing a level of emotional discernment and cognitive information that surpasses human reasoning and is not mediated by the external senses" (p. 323). She also maintains that body, mind, and spirit "are dynamically woven together, one part affecting and being affected by the other parts" (p. 9). Stallwood (as cited in Stoll, 1989) also describes spirituality as a dynamic interplay between all the dimensions of human nature and proposes a model of human beings in which the spirit is the central core that influences and is influenced by the psychological and biophysical dimensions that, respectively, form the outer rings. Human spirituality, according to this model, must diffuse through the more external 'layers' and may, thus, be manifested through psychosocial and physiological behaviours.

Stuart, Deckro and Mandle (1989) describe spirituality as a vital force, or transcendent energy, that has the capacity to profoundly influence all aspects of life, to elevate individuals from the humdrum of daily life, and to assist in the ascription of meaning and provision of direction to life. Various other authors suggest that spiritual experience is frequently encountered in the ordinary activities of daily life and encompasses a wide variety of creative expressions, including art, songs, reading, journal writing, poetry, music visualization, mythology, and stories of social relationships and service to others (Bolen, 1996; Hutchings, 1991; Mealey, Richardson, & Dimico, 1989; Reed, 1991). Finally, Labun (as cited in Emblen, 1992) defines spirituality as:

> An aspect of the total person that influences as well as acts in conjunction with other aspects of the person...is related to and integrated with the functioning and expression of all other aspects of the person; has a relational nature which is expressed through interpersonal relationships between persons and through a transcendent relationship with another realm; involves relationships and produces behaviours and feelings which demonstrate the existence of love, faith, hope, and trust, therein providing meaning to life and a reason for being. (p. 43)

The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging defines spiritual well-being as "the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness" (Moberg, 1979, p. 5). In a later work, Moberg (as cited in Thorson & Cook, 1980) identifies several internal and external influences that affect spirituality and well-being in the elderly, such as the availability of sociocultural resources, relief from existential fear and anxiety, preparation for death, personality integration as a function of maturity, dignity, and one's philosophy of life.

Stoll (1989) provides an illustration of spirituality as a cruciform process model that is continuously influenced by health, illness, developmental, and temporal factors. The vertical axis of the model represents a transcendent relationship with God, or a personal deity (however defined), and the horizontal axis reflects both intrapersonal and extrapersonal relationships.

Ellison (1983) recognizes the relationship between humans and God as spiritual but considers existential relationships to be psychological. He states that:

> It is the *spirit* of human beings which enables and motivates us to search for meaning and purpose in life, to seek the supernatural or some meaning which transcends us, to wonder about our origins and our identities, to require morality and equity. It is the spirit which synthesizes the total personality and provides some sense of energizing direction and order. The spiritual dimension does not exist in isolation from our psyche and *soma*, but provides an integrative force. (p. 331)

Several other authors also identify spirituality as a vertically-directed relationship between an individual and a transcendent ideal, embodied as God or a higher consciousness, and view all existential, or human, relationships as horizontally directed towards self or other beings and *psychological* in nature (Christy & Lyon, 1979; Duke & Brown, 1979; Karns, 1991; Moore, 1992; Piepgras, 1968; Piles, 1990; Salladay & McDonnell, 1989). These authors depart from the majority of contemporary authors who consider such interpersonal relationships to be an essential component of the *spiritual* dimension of human nature.

Buber (1970), a theologian and philosopher, describes spirit as the *essential* aspect of human beings, the distinguishing feature that separates humans from all other living creatures; it is the spirit, he states, that permits humans to enter into one of either two kinds of relationships. Relationships that are characterized by mutual interaction, directness, ineffability, and genuine presence are deemed "I-Thou" relationships, while relationships that bear a subject-object relation and lack mutual interaction and unmediated presence are considered "I-It" relationships. "I-Thou" relationships require a willingness to participate in direct, unmediated engagement with another person and a high level of personal self-awareness. According to Buber, spirituality is the ability to openly enter into a committed, dynamic, empathic, and unmediated "I-Thou" relationship with God, the Eternal Thou, or another individual who also chooses to openly and spontaneously engage in such relational interaction. As such, this type of relationship may be viewed as a 'sacred' trust between individuals and is of primary concern to professional nursing.

Frankl (1959), a psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, defines spirituality as a search for existential meaning and asserts that "the striving to find meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man" (p. 104). He emphasizes the capacity of the human spirit to transcend difficult circumstances and suffering through the deliberate choice of how to respond to crisis situations. The ability to choose one's response to adversity and to rise above and move beyond suffering provides individuals with the opportunity to ascribe meaning to various difficult life experiences. Such an ability to invest life with meaning results in a 'zest' for living, according to Byrne (1985), and infuses one with confidence (Fallding, 1979). Hungelmann et al. (1985) and Heriot (1992) agree that the ability to find meaning in life, the primary function of the human spirit, leads to personal satisfaction with one's life in all its fullness, including both positive and negative life experiences.

Speck (1998) describes spirituality as "a search for existential meaning within a life experience, with reference to a power other than the self, which may not necessarily be called 'God'" (p. 22). A simpler, yet less precise, definition, provided by Whipp (1998), suggests that spirituality may best be understood as "the human concern for things that matter" (p. 139). A more expansive definition, proffered by Goddard (1995), suggests that spirituality is "a universal, innate, integrative energy force, with transcendent potential, that seeks to establish and maintain relational connections with existential and/or metaphysical realms" (p. 145). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) indicate that spirituality is a journey of discovery that encompasses both an internal and external search for the inherent connectedness to all forms of life and the eternal Source of being; such a search affects all aspects of being and living. Accordingly, spirituality is the very essence of our *beingness*. Finally, Renetzky (1979) asserts that spirituality is constituted of three essential components, all of which must be present for spirituality to exist and flourish: the power *within* an individual to find meaning, purpose and fulfillment in life, suffering and death; the *will* to live; and the need for belief and faith in self, others and God, or a power *beyond* the self (p. 215). This definition emphasizes elements of both immanence and transcendence.

Virtually all of the foregoing authors describe spirituality as universal in its scope and as essential to the ascription of meaning to human life; they refer to an animating energy source, a willingness to engage in authentic interpersonal relationships, an ability to reflect intensively on personal experience, an openness to transcendent experiences, and a high level of self-awareness. Most also emphasize a personal relationship with God (however defined), or a power greater than self. Nevertheless, ontological questions regarding spirituality remain unanswered and theoretical conceptualizations are based on a diversity of philosophical positions. This continued confusion over the nature of spirituality further obfuscates the relationship between spiritual dimensionality and health and necessitates that the spiritual dimension of human *being* be further investigated.

The Power of the Spirit in Health and Illness

As noted in the foregoing historical and contemporary literature reviews, much of the available literature concerning the human spiritual dimension is of a theoretical disposition. It is the product of centuries of philosophical speculation and skepticism, sociohistorical and cultural influences, and evolving scientific knowledge; it is largely untested and poorly understood, due to its metaphysical nature and the difficulties associated with objectification and measurement. The dearth of research into human spirituality and spiritual experience, with a few notable exceptions as described below, demonstrates the need to find methods of investigation that will adequately address this phenomenon. The nursing research that has been done has generally been focused on health and well-being and rarely includes actual examples of spiritual experience. Transitional, traumatic, and transformational life experiences often disturb or disrupt an individual's sense of peaceful existence and internal harmony and may cause a person to 'turn inward' and temporarily withdraw from social interaction as individuals attempt to cope with difficult changes and try to find meaning in the experiences. Younger (1995) suggests that social withdrawal and alienation often result from a sense of *dis*-connectedness from others and spiritual estrangement from one's source of transcendent power. She claims that as individuals begin to reestablish relationships, or *re*-connect, the level of spiritual integrity gradually increases and health, apparently, improves. Anecdotal evidence of improved health and/or unexplained healings abound in various media forums, yet, despite its widely acclaimed propensity for enhancing human well-being, spirituality has seldom been investigated by researchers from an emic perspective, or from the point of view of individuals who have had spiritual experiences that were manifested in adverse circumstances.

> That spirit cannot be measured makes it hard to "prove" spiritual influences on physical health. Some of the strongest suggested evidence comes from inexplicable healings such as those at Lourdes and from people who have undergone spontaneous remission from cancer, many of whom report the kind of profound life change associated with spiritual awakening. (Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1993, p. 149)

The time has arrived for the health sciences to attend to this phenomenon and to begin a more thorough investigation of its claims because of its potential benefits for enhancing well-being.

Existential Crisis and Suffering as Precipitants of Spiritual Growth

As has been previously stated, many authors have suggested that situations of perceived threat, illness, loss, suffering, or impending death may precipitate existential crises; yet, these same situations may also present opportunities for spiritual actualization (Bolen, 1996; Frank, 1991; Frankl, 1959; McColman, 1997; Reed, 1987a, 1987). During crisis situations individuals are often, perhaps for the first time, exposed to personal vulnerability or possible mortality, causing them to consider questions of ultimacy or other issues of deepest concern in life (Bolen, 1996; Dickinson, 1975; Kreidler, 1984; Soeken & Carson, 1989; Stoll, 1989). It is at this point, paradoxically, that existential crisis may become a precipitant of spiritual experience.

Illness generally represents a crisis situation for individuals and often leads to feelings of anger, despair, depression, grief, loneliness, and anxiety from which, subsequently, a sense of hopelessness or powerlessness may also develop (Soeken & Carson, 1989). Although a person's response patterns will vary somewhat in accordance with his or her unique hermeneutic horizon, the general response patterns of individuals diagnosed with acute, chronic, or terminal illness are similar except, perhaps, in their intensity or rapidity of onset. Bolen (1996) uses the analogy of a stone being thrown into a placid lake to describe the impact of a life-threatening illness or existential challenge. The impact of the stone on the still water causes multiple concentric circles to radiate out from the point of entry causing disturbances on the surface, much like the feelings, thoughts, and reactions that are stimulated by critical life experiences. Crisis, like the stone, causes disturbance, *dis*-integration, and *dis*-ease and impacts all aspects of life and relationships. The initial shock of illness often induces a realization of existential finitude and creates a state of anticipatory grief that results in existential suffering (Imara, 1975; Younger, 1995). Younger (1995), like Frankl (1959) and Bolen (1996), suggests that the choices made by individuals faced with intolerable suffering will determine the nature and quality of the suffering experiences and their effects on the persons' spiritual perspectives.

Steeves and Kahn (1987) examined the transcendent experiences, or experiences of meaning, that were described as having occurred spontaneously by several hospice patients and their family members in response to extreme physical suffering, mental anguish, or anticipatory grieving. They discovered a frequently recurring motif within the experiences wherein particular common, quotidian life events precipitated unexpected, unmediated experiences of communion with a force greater than self. Each of the transcendent moments was closely associated with periods of extreme existential suffering and contained two essential features: suffering seemed to be temporarily lifted, and there was a feeling of communion with a greater force(s). The critical incidents subsequently altered each person's mode of experiencing reality and transformed his or her perception of suffering, thereby contributing to a sense of peace and contentment. Although spirituality was not expressly named, its presence is implied in the descriptions of transcendent, meaningful experiences and relationships with a greater and more powerful force than self.

During a similar time period, Reed (1987a) conducted a study to investigate spiritual well-being among terminally ill and healthy adults and found that terminally ill hospitalized adults demonstrated greater levels of spiritual well-being than both non-terminally ill hospitalized and healthy non-hospitalized groups. This is consistent with the theoretical opinions previously stated that indicate the need to face personal finitude before being able to move through spiritual crisis. From the examples provided, it becomes readily apparent that the severity, consequences, degree and type of suffering, and level of potential incapacitation imposed by an existential crisis may all influence its potential determinant effect on the spirituality of an individual. The perceived loss or threat to 'self' that is associated with suffering and critical life events or transitions may lead to a spiritual crisis and an intensified search for meaning and purpose in life (Bruner, 1984; Copp, 1990; Dougherty, 1990; Kahn & Steeves, 1994; Sims, 1987; Steeves & Kahn, 1987; Younger, 1995). Frankl (1959) stresses that the freedom of the human spirit to transcend suffering can lead to the discovery of meaning in even the most adverse of circumstances.

The themes abstracted from the aforenoted literature related to spiritual dimensionality and suffering or existential crisis illustrate the significance of various interpersonal relationships, the possible realization of transcendent experiences of communion or oneness with the universe, or God (however defined), the awareness of a vital or animating life energy or spirit, a general sense of existential well-being, and heightened levels of self-awareness. These themes are consistent with the review of theoretical literature, as presented previously, despite the focus in this later literature on critical events as antecedents of spiritual awareness. Consequently, it was essential that study participants were asked to recount any major life transitions or spiritual crises that occurred immediately prior to, or at the time of, their self-identified spiritual experiences.

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter One has served as an introduction to the topic of transformational spiritual growth in response to existential crisis and human suffering. Brief synoptic reviews of historical and contemporary literature have been provided as a background for this investigation into spiritual experience. In this first chapter, the significance of the research problem to the discipline of nursing and to professional practice has also been identified. In Chapter Two, the research design is presented and the selection of hermeneutic phenomenology as the most appropriate research method for this investigation is explained. A brief historical synopsis of the method is provided, in addition to a description of the research that was undertaken. In Chapter Three, participants' storied narratives are presented in synoptic form to provide readers with particularized anecdotal accounts of spiritual experience from which to judge the analytic accuracy of thematic clustering and model development. Chapter Four contains a discussion of the emergent themes with specific examples from participants' interviews and an overview of the conceptual model development. The chapter ends with a poem written as a synthesized, compositive account of the emergent themes. Finally, in Chapter Five, the implications of this investigation for nursing and suggested directions for future research are described. Participant profiles, event paths, and thematic matrices from the narrative accounts, as well as information letters and a copy of the informed consent, are presented in the Appendices.

Summary

I have proposed that human spirituality is a neglected dimension of human nature with unrecognized transformational potential to enhance health and healing, particularly in response to existential life crises and suffering. It is, therefore, of significance to the nursing profession and worthy of investigation. Rationale to support the need for this study as a means to ameliorate existential anguish and suffering, and for promoting spiritual well-being, health, and healing, even in the midst of trauma and/or illness have also been presented, along with selected supporting background information.

Chapter Two

We have pretty well finished the geographical exploration of the earth; we have pushed the scientific exploration of nature, both lifeless and living, to a point at which its main outlines have become clear; but the exploration of human nature and its possibilities has scarcely begun. A vast New World of uncharted possibilities awaits its Columbus.

Julian Huxley

The Path to Knowledge: Research Perspective

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Since the question *"What is the nature of spiritual experience?"* is essentially a question of human 'nature' that is bounded by metaphysics, a method of investigation that is epistemically grounded in speculative philosophy seemed eminently suited to the question. As a dimension of 'human' nature, the investigation of spirituality further falls in the category of 'human science', rather than 'natural science', as a philosophical endeavour. This distinction between 'natural' and 'human' science is generally attributed to the German biographer, philosopher, and historian, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who wanted to develop an epistemological foundation for the human sciences to rival that of the natural sciences (Urmson & Ree, 1989). Dilthey considered both the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) to be empirical, or based on human experience, despite their conflicting goals and methods of inquiry. According to Dilthey, the aim of the natural sciences is to investigate only external, objective, experiences of nature that focus on *causal explanations* and a search for universal laws of behaviour. The human sciences, on the other hand, deal with internal, subjective, or 'lived' experiences that focus on *understanding* the essential nature and structures of human experience as illustrated by particular manifestations of human thought and behaviour. Consequently, since spiritual experiences generally defy observation and are mostly private and particular in nature, they require a method of investigation that invites understanding through intense personal reflection and introspection by the participants and encourages complete verbal descriptions of actual 'lived' experiences, along with their attendant meaning. Therefore, a phenomenological method was deemed appropriate for this investigation of spiritual experience.

The primary purpose of phenomenological inquiry is:

> ...to 'borrow' *other* people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole human experience....But why do we need to collect the 'data' of other people's experiences? *We gather other people's experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves* [emphasis in original]. From a phenomenological point of view we are not primarily interested in the subjective experiences of our so-called subjects or informants, for the sake of being able to report on how something is seen from their particular view, perspective, or vantage point...[However,] the deeper goal, which is always the thrust of phenomenological research, remains oriented to asking the question of *what is the nature of this phenomenon as an essentially human experience* [emphasis added]. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

In order to acquire such understanding of human spiritual experiences, however, it is important to also use a method that focuses on the meanings ascribed to the experiences by the individuals who lived them, for it is only through the particular experiences of others that researchers can become informed and thus enabled to render the full significance of *meaning* as it relates to the nature of the phenomenon as an essentially human experience. The ascription of meaning to individual 'lived' experiences itself constitutes an interpretive act and, therefore, adds a unique and complementary element to phenomenological description. Consequently, a human science approach that incorporates both the *interpretation*, or ascribed meaning, *and descriptions* of experience, hermeneutic phenomenology, was chosen for this enquiry.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a hybrid of descriptive and interpretive methodologies that developed during the mid-twentieth century. It is an evolutionary variant of the early Husserlian descriptive, or *eidetic*, phenomenology and collected works of historicists such as Schleiermacher and Dilthey, that was initially propounded by Heidegger as a means of 'coming to *understand*', rather than to merely describe, the ontological meanings of human 'existence'. Heidegger's method was founded on both *descriptions* of existential experience (phenomenology) *and* on *interpretations* of the meanings ascribed to the experiences (hermeneutics). According to Van Manen (1990), this apparent contradiction of methods:

> ...may be resolved if one acknowledges that the (phenomenological) 'facts' of lived experience are always already meaningfully (hermeneutically) experienced. Moreover, even the 'facts' of lived experience need to be captured in language (the human science text) and this is inevitably an interpretive process. (p. 181)

Hermeneutics and phenomenology must, then, form the basis for all attempts at meaningful interpretations of human beings, including human thought processes, language, activities, and artifacts (expressions) across all sociohistoric contexts.

The emphasis on linguistic expressions (symbolic representations) of experience, inherent within the hermeneutic method, brings semiotics into the mix as well; consequently, hermeneutic phenomenology may be construed as a unique combination of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and semiotics, or as descriptions of lived experience that have already been meaningfully interpreted through one's choice of language. Since words are merely arbitrary linguistic symbols that have been developed over time by societies as a function of a shared cultural history, they often convey meaning that individuals may not even be aware of on a conscious level and, therefore, demand careful consideration. Although word usage may change over time, words continue to carry original meaning that is often missed in ordinary usage. Therefore, language must be considered from the dual standpoints of linguistic choice and word context as part of the hermeneutic aspect of phenomenological inquiry. In order to more fully understand the development and aim of hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, it is helpful to trace the development of the movement from its inception. Consequently, a brief historical synopsis is included here as a preparatory foundation for the reader.

A Brief Historical Synopsis of Method

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation, is a method of inquiry developed in response to the claims of positivism that empirical science alone could establish the bounds of genuine knowledge (Reeder, 1988). The term "hermeneutics" is derived from the name of the Greek herald and messenger god, Hermes, who was considered the "patron of all forms of communication" (Stoneman, 1991, p. 93). Its etymological origin is the Greek "*hermeneutikos*" which suggests the process of bringing to clarity, or understanding, that which was previously unintelligible, or alien. Originally developed by the Greeks to interpret classical Greco-Latin works, such as those of Homer, hermeneutics rose to prominence during the seventeenth century when it was employed, primarily for biblical exegesis; it was later expanded to include the interpretation of secular texts (Fjelland & Gejengedal, 1994; Ricoeur, 1981). Although the use of hermeneutics as a method of textual interpretation clearly pre-dated the phenomenological movement, it was not until Friedrich Schleiermacher considered its potential as a 'technical' scientific method that hermeneutics became an evolutionary influence on the development of the human sciences.

Hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of particular linguistic symbols as a representative form of cultural and social expression that can be used to "understand", rather than "explain" phenomena (Fjelland & Gjengedal, 1994). The goal of hermeneutics is the disclosure and understanding of common, everday events so that meaning is revealed while context is preserved, despite the overlay of common cultural and linguistic patterns employed by a society (Leonard, 1994). As such, hermeneutic enquiries focus on the question, *"What is the meaning ascribed to the experience of this phenomenon by these individuals?"* According to Altheide and Johnson (1994), "contextual, taken-for-granted, tacit knowledge plays a constitutive role in providing meaning" (p. 492); therefore, implicitly understood knowledge must be brought to conscious awareness prior to explanatory attempts.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Friedrich Schleiermacher attempted to combine biblical exegesis and classical philology, the two branches of classical hermeneutics, to develop a 'technology', or method of interpretation, that could be used to "elaborate the universally valid rules of understanding" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 46). In other words, hermeneutics would provide a method for combining a *grammatical* interpretation that focused on common cultural characteristics of discourse with a *technical* interpretation that focused on the unique and specific message of the writer of the text. Schleiermacher also stressed the need to interpret texts exclusively within the sociohistorical contexts in which they were written because, he believed, understanding could not be achieved without reference to previous points in time or in isolation from its interpreter, an assumption that later became known as the 'hermeneutic circle' of understanding because of its dialectical nature.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1831-1911)

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm Dilthey, today considered the father of modern hermeneutics, determined that the human sciences were in need of a 'rigorous science' that could provide a respectable methodology and an epistemological foundation for sociohistorical knowledge that was comparable to those of the natural sciences (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 49). Dilthey concluded that hermeneutics could form the basis of such a science and proceeded to extend Schleiermacher's method and employ hermeneutics as a means to understand human motivation and behaviour. Dilthey described two fundamental ways of experiencing the world; the first, through detached observation (natural science, or *Naturwissenschaften*) and the second, through living in a value-laden world of experience and interpretation (human science, or *Geisteswissenschaften*). He maintained that human beings are fundamentally different from the objects of scientific attitude and that human actions could not be explained by external causes, they could only be understood 'from within' through reflection (Scruton, 1994). Dilthey, however, faced a dilemma that created an unresolved tension throughout his work; his search for an epistemological foundation for the human sciences resulted in a dichotomous opposition between the *explanation* (*erklaren*) of nature and the *understanding* (*verstehen*) of human beings and their mental processes. Neverheless, Dilthey remained committed to hermeneutics as the new "fundamental science" for the study of human beings, as evidenced by his proclamation in the preface to his book "Introduction to the Human Sciences", written in 1883:

> Only in inner experience, in the facts of consciousness, have I found a firm anchor for my thinking….All science is experiential; but all experience must be related back to and derives its validity from the conditions and context of consciousness in which it arises, i.e. the totality of our nature. We designate as 'epistemological' this standpoint which consistently recognizes the impossibility of going behind these conditions….Modern science can acknowledge no other than this epistemological standpoint. (Dilthey, as cited in Bambach, 1995, p. 132)

For Dilthey, the distanced objectivity of the natural sciences precluded the possibility of understanding human behaviour and motivation which, he surmised, required empathetic identification with other human beings. The hermeneutic circle of understanding, previously described by Schleiermacher, began, for Dilthey, with a whole (human behaviour or event) and moved to an increasingly probative questioning of the parts (mental life, motivation) that culminated in a subsequent synthesis of the parts and a new conceptualization of the whole (understanding).

Paul Ricoeur (1913-19??)

Ricoeur's primary contribution to the field of hermeneutics lies in his formulation of a concept of the *text*. According to Ricoeur (1981), a text is discourse permanently fixed in writing; it is a structured totality, the meaning of which cannot be reduced to mere sentences. Ricoeur approaches discourse as an internal dialectic between an event and the meaning ascribed to the event through speaking (Thompson, as cited in Ricoeur, 1981). As discourse is fixed in writing, it becomes 'distanced' from its speaker in a variety of ways, a notion that Ricoeur termed *'distanciation'*. In the first instance, distanciation occurs when the meaning of an event surpasses the actual event by its being verbalized. In its second instance, written discourse is distanced from spoken discourse in that it is removed from the intentionality of the original speaker. In other words, the text may signify something different than the speaker meant; as such, it becomes autonomous in its message. The third form of distanciation involves a change in the intended direction of the message from its originally specified hearer to an unknown potential audience. Consequently, the text is distanced from any *particular* individual and is open to being read by anyone; it thus becomes 'decontextualized' from the sociohistoric conditions of its production and open to an infinite series of readings and variety of interpretations. The text, then, becomes the written representation of a projected world which will be interpreted uniquely according to the sociocultural and temporal situation of the particular reader. Finally, distanciation also occurs as the text is freed from ostensive references. Whereas, in normal conversation between individuals, referents are determined by the shared reality of the conversants in the specific speech context, this shared reality ceases to exist when the discourse becomes fixed in writing. Therefore, the referential dimension must be uncovered during the process of interpretation. Given these various forms of distanciation, Ricoeur concludes that, "Just as the resolution of the tension established by a metaphor requires the construction of a new sense, so too the meaning of a text must be guessed or construed as a whole" (p. 14).

Once the text has been permanently fixed in writing, the interpretive process begins to unfold. Following the first, or naïve, reading for surface meaning, a critical, reflective process that examines the linguistic structure of the text and its content is undertaken to deliberately and systematically evaluate and clarify potential sources of misunderstanding. The hermeneutic process culminates in an *act of appropriation* wherein the textual message which was previously alien is intuited and assimilated as understanding, thereby resulting in an expansion of the reader's hermeneutic horizon. There is no attempt to revisit the original intent of the author, simply to actualize the meaning of the text for the reader. According to Ricoeur (1981), "It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self" (p. 143); it is the "actualization of meaning as addressed to someone" (p. 185). Only once understanding, or appropriation, has occurred can attempts be made to explicate meaning. The final act of appropriation, then, becomes the dialectical counterpart of the asocial, ahistorical, and atemporal distanciation created by the writing down in textual form the spoken discourse of human beings, and the final element of understanding. Since all of the participant interviews have been transformed into textual accounts, the process of distanciation has been completed and must now move to interpretation and appropriation as a prelude to explanation. Consequently, Ricoeurian hermeneutics necessarily forms a cornerstone of the phenomenological method used for this investigation.

Phenomenology

The phenomenological tradition has its epistemological roots in the realm of speculative philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. As a specific philosophical movement, phenomenology was developed during the ninetheenth century as a reactionary alternative to the analytic-reductionist approach of positivistic science that had reigned supreme since the scientific revolution approximately 300 years earlier. As the scientific method of the natural sciences rose in prominence during the Enlightenment period, the philosophical knowledge base that had sustained Western society for the previous two millennia was unceremoniously dismissed as esoteric and antiquated. In a methodological article published in 1983, Omery states that, "The phenomenological method in philosophy began to crystallize in reaction to the denigration of philosophical knowledge and the objectification of humans" (p. 51). The success of the scientific method in contributing to the control and prediction of phenomena in the natural world had led to its increasing, inappropriate application to human beings as a means of generating knowledge to predict, control, and explain human behaviour and experience.

The etymological origin of the term "phenomenon" is the Greek "*phainomenon*" which means 'to show' or 'to appear'; it is how a thing appears to the mind, as distinguished from a "noumenon", from the Greek "*nooumenon*", which is a purely intellectual apprehension of a 'thing-in-itself' (Onions, 1998; Urdang, 1980). Phenomenology, then, is the study of 'things' (objects and events) as they appear (phenomena) to the human mind, or are mentally apprehended in experience; phenomena are 'shaped' by human perceptual and cognitive faculties and are, thus, constituted into "lived-through" experiences" (Boyd, 1993; Cohen, 1987; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Omery & Mack, 1995; Stapleton, 1983). Kantian metaphysics posits that phenomena, the mental apprehension or 'appearance' of 'things' can be known through experience, whereas noumena, the 'things-in-themselves', remain inaccessible and nonsensuous because "the noumenal lies behind the mind-imposed forms of time, space, and causation, and is therefore unknowable" (Blackburn, 1994, p. 265).

Although phenomenology has evolved over past decades and now encompasses diverse movements and viewpoints that exemplify particular variations of the original phenomenological philosophy, its underlying aim is to discover knowledge, in the *verstehen* (understanding) tradition, that illustrates the essential nature of shared human experiences (phenomena) as they are experienced by individuals through their senses (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Swanson-Kauffman & Schonwald, 1988). As such, phenomenological investigations focus on the question, *"What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?"* (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Often, this knowledge is contextually embedded within the phenomenal experience and cannot be obtained through the process of scientific reduction.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)

Although the term "phenomenology" was first employed by Kant in relation to science in 1764 (Cohen, 1987), Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher and mathematician of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is generally acknowledged to be the founder of the phenomenological tradition. Husserl objected to the use of natural science methods for the study of human beings because of its objectification of individuals and analytic-reductionist focus. He asserted that knowledge of human beings could not be separated from experience because knowledge is acquired in the process of "living through" experiences; consequently, Husserl stressed that "lived experiences" must be systematically investigated using a 'rigorous scientific' research method specifically designed for the study of human beings (Boyd, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Omery & Mack, 1995). To uncover the knowledge embedded within phenomenal experience as it is lived, Husserl advocated a return to the 'things' themselves, or to the immediate objects of perception (phenomena). Since lived experience is constituted in the act of perception, Husserl reasoned that the closest one could come to restructuring phenomenal experience was to understand the constitutive nature of perception (Boyd, 1993; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Omery & Mack, 1995; Stapleton, 1983). The primary concern of phenomenology, for Husserl, was consciousness itself and the discovery of *essences* within human lived experiences; his phenomenological method represented an attempt to develop a rigorous science that would produce knowledge of the world as it is 'lived' through the study of things as they appear (or things in themselves) in and to consciousness.

Husserl's original phenomenological philosophy has been identified as "*eidetic*", or essentialist, descriptive, and transcendental; it is an epistemological approach that attempts to clarify phenomena as they have been lived and constituted in human perception. Descriptive phenomenology involves a process of rigorous reflection, wherein an intuitive grasp of the essential nature, or meaning structure (*eidos*), of a phenomenon is sought and subsequently described (Omery & Mack, 1995; Ray, 1994). According to Husserl, the description of eidetic structures (essences) could be accomplished through "transcendental subjectivity"; he stated that, "by using the method of *epoche* or bracketing (holding in abeyance) one's presuppositions or theories and by deep reflection, one could seek the roots of the beginnings of knowledge in the subjective processes, 'in the things themselves'" (Ray, 1994, p. 119).

Martin Heidegger **(1889-1976)**

Heidegger, a student and critic of Husserl, and an early adherent of transcendental, or essentialist, phenomenology, eventually broke from Husserlian transcendental idealism and assumed an ontological perspective that has gradually evolved into a form of interpretive, or hermeneutic, phenomenology. Heidegger openly criticized Husserl's eidetic phenomenology, particularly his emphasis on description and explanation (*erklaren*), rather than understanding (*verstehen*) and formally disassociated himself from the transcendental movement, which he believed to be useless, if not counterproductive and spurious (Cohen & Omery, 1994). He believed it was critical to focus on what it means to '*be'*, rather than on what it is to *know*, as human beings. For Heidegger, understanding could no longer be viewed as a way of knowing but only as a way of being, part of our human being-in-the-world (Thompson, as cited in Ricoeur, 1981). Heidegger, therefore, shifted the focus of phenomenology from a descriptive emphasis on how human beings come to *know* their world (an epistemological perspective) to an interpretive stance that emphasized *understanding* of human *being-in-the-world* (an ontological perspective). The aim of Heideggerian, or hermeneutic, phenomenology is the interpretation of ontological meanings, or questions of "being", as a method of acquiring knowledge of the fundamental structures of our "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) that are not immediately apparent to our intuiting and analyzing (Boyd, 1993; Cohen, 1987; Cohen & Omery, 1994; Scruton, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

Heidegger developed a theory of persons and personal relations in which he distinguished mere being (*Sein*) from 'being' as a self-conscious subject (*Dasein*) in the world (Scruton, 1994). *Dasein* is able to recognize other beings of its own kind and, as such, is interconnected with others in the lifeworld (Ricoeur, 1981; Scruton, 1994). Through this interconnectedness, *Dasein* is able to discern the life of other beings and learn about them through the manifestations (signs) of their existence. Heidegger's focus on the interconnectedness of human beings in the lifeworld extended and complemented Dilthey's assertion that human spiritual (extra-physical) life is captured in structured totalities that could be understood by other human beings; in other words, the notion of human *intersubjectivity*. In describing Dilthey's quest for a distinctive feature of understanding, Ricoeur (1981) writes:

> Every *human science*...presupposes a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others. For in natural knowledge, man grasps only phenomena distinct from himself, the fundamental 'thingness' of which escapes him. In the human order, on the other hand, man (*sic*) knows man; however alien another man may be to us, he is not alien in the sense of an unknowable physical thing. The difference of status between natural things and the mind dictates the difference of status between explanation and understanding. Man is not racially alien to man, because he offers signs of his own existence. To understand these signs is to understand man. (p. 49)

Heidegger also disavowed eidetic phenomenology because he did not believe that previous knowledge (presuppositions) could be placed in abeyance, or bracketed. Instead, he held that previous knowledge must be declared in order to expose and lay bare the foundations of one's thinking. Phenomenology, in the Heideggerian sense, denies the possibility of presuppositionless knowledge of any phenomenon "as it is in itself" but, instead, focuses on disclosing the presuppositions that form the hermeneutic 'horizon' of an individual's lifeworld. In other words, hermeneutic interpretation can only occur in the presence of such everyday understanding that a person already has about specific phenomena (Cohen & Omery, 1994). According to Heidegger (as cited in Chessick, 1990), "all scientific activity arises in a context of preunderstanding that derives from practical dealings in the lived world of various activities" (p. 260). Therefore, because all human beings live in a specific sociohistoric cultural context with unique customs, rules of language, rituals, and social institutions, detached, objective knowledge can never be possible. These 'preunderstandings' form the hermeneutic horizon from which an individual views life and ascribes meaning to experience. As Ricoeur (1981) points out, "The most fundamental condition of the hermeneutical circle lies in the structure of pre-understanding which relates all explication to the understanding which precedes and supports it" (p. 108). Therefore, the interpretive process will be influenced by the 'fore-structures' which form the 'hermeneutic horizon' of the person. According to Ray (1994), "the central distinction between the Husserlian and Heideggerian approaches is that Heidegger articulates the position that presuppositions are not to be eliminated or suspended, but are what constitute the possibility of intelligibility or meaning" (p. 120).

Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Martin Heidegger, revisited Heidegger's description of the hermeneutic circle and extended his idea of pre-understandings, or the fore-structures of knowledge, to include the "prejudices" held by the reader of a text (Gadamer, 1984, p. 236). He emphasized the importance of being aware of one's personal prejudices in addition to being sensitive to the text:

> All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought and direct its gaze 'on the things themselves'... For it is necessary to keep one's gaze fixed on the thing throughout all the distractions that the interpreter will constantly experience in the process and which originate in himself.... But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' in the matter of the object nor the extinction of one's self, but the conscious assimilation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own biases, so that the text may present itself in all its newness and thus be able to assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (pp. 238, 236)

By being aware of one's biases and engaging thoughtfully with the text, the interpreter is able to enter into a relationship with the written discourse that will permit understanding. Just as in conversation one must 'hear' the message of the speaker and weigh it in relation to one's own pre-understanding or fore-knowledge, the interpreter emerges from the encounter with a new, changed understanding. Gadamer emphasizes that communication "between two differently situated consciousnesses occurs by means of the fusion of their horizons, that is the intersection of their views" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 62). Consequently, one's horizon of understanding is in a constant state of flux and, therefore, there can be no absolute 'truth', it must change in accordance with each successive reader.

> Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot hold blindly to our own fore-meaning of the thing if we would understand the meaning of another. Of course this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content, and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or of the text. But this openness always includes our placing the other meaning in a relation with the whole of our own meanings or ourselves in a relation to it. (Gadamer, 1984, p. 238)

The cultivation of meaning from a text is dialectical in nature and moves through a series of ongoing interpretations between past and present points of understanding. Throughout the interpretive process, language is the universal medium of understanding and the carrier of all historical and cultural influence; language, therefore, acquires a fundamental importance in understanding. According to Gadamer (1984), "All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of language which would allow the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language" (p. 350).

From this brief historical summary, it becomes apparent that hermeneutics and phenomenology are not only complementary, but essential to the study of human beings. Inherent within both methodologies is an emphasis on linguistics as a critical component of understanding. The descriptive-hermeneutic variant of phenomenological investigation that I have chosen as a framework for this study is frequently observed in contemporary writings and exemplified by the work of Max Van Manen (1990) in his well-known book '*Researching Lived Experience*'. Although Van Manen emphasizes the importance of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and semiotics to human science research, he asserts that:

> In a serious sense there is not really a "method" understood as a set of investigative procedures that one can master relatively quickly…[and]…While it is true that the method of phenomenology is that there is no method, yet there is tradition, a body of knowledge and insights, a history of lives and thinkers and authors, which, taken as an example, constitutes both a source and a methodological ground for present human science research practices. Thus the broad field of phenomenological research can be considered as a set of guides and recommendations for a principled form of inquiry that neither simply rejects or ignores tradition, nor slavishly follows or kneels in front of it.
>
> It is hoped then that this text will be helpful in describing some methodological themes and methodological features of human science research, which will enable the reader to select or invent appropriate research methods, techniques, and procedures for a particular problem or question….Discussions of method and methodology are meant not to prescribe a mechanistic set of procedures, but to animate inventiveness and stimulate insight. (p. 30)

Despite the apparent 'lack of method' of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, Van Manen does provide a variety of suggested activities that can be employed as a means to writing sensitive, insightful, and descriptive phenomenological texts. These activities include, but are not limited to, orienting oneself to the phenomenon of interest, investigating and reflecting on selected phenomenal experiences as they have been lived through, using anecdotal narratives to communicate complex ideas, studying word usage and implied meanings, and actively writing, reflecting and re-writing sensitive descriptions of the phenomenon. Each of these activities will be further described as part of the research design in the following section.

Etymological Tracings

Etymology, or the study of word origins, provides an appropriate beginning point for hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry because it offers researchers the opportunity to gain insight into the pre-evolutionary conceptualizations of specific phenomena. Often, words are used without conscious thought to their underlying meanings or to the inherent richness they reveal about the world. Merleau-Ponty (1962) claims that, "there is not a human word, not a gesture, even one which is the outcome of habit or absent-mindedness, which has not some meaning" (p. xviii). Yet, such meaning is often overlooked in the taken-for-granted world of ordinary usage. Words are chosen to describe phenomenal moments, or 'lived' experiences, and reflect the already interpreted life events of an individual's subjective consciousness. Van Manen (1990) suggests that many words used to describe phenomena have lost some of their original meaning; he further notes that ordinary language is a rich repository of infinite variations of human experience, but one that has deteriorated sufficiently that it has become distanced from common, everyday life experience. McColman (1997) concurs and points out that "like a hoe, language is the tool we use to till the soil of our minds". (p. 31); language conveys meaning, and the choice of words conveys 'hidden' worlds of culture and past experience.

Words, it would seem, are not randomly chosen expressions of experience but are symbols, fraught with meaningful implications and based on centuries of cultural and historical experience. For example, the terms 'spirit' and 'spirituality', as previously noted, can be traced etymologically to the Latin *spiritus* and the Greek *pneumatikos*, meaning breath, wind, or air (McColman, 1997; Onions, 1998; Runes, 1984; Urdang, 1980). Because all of the words used to describe breathing (inspiration, respiration, expiration) contain the Latin root of spirit, *spirare*, meaning to breathe or have life, the act of breathing must remain irrevocably tied to the animating life force, or vital energy, of spirit. Spirit, then, is the vital life principle that constitutes human existence, or 'being', and the term carries with it connotations of energy, life, vitality, vibrancy, and the capacity for 'being'. Because the choice of a particular word, such as *inspiration*, carries within it an implicit meaning often found in its original form; etymological origins are important to the understanding of spirituality. However, without conscious reflection on or consideration by the reader or 'hearer', the inherent meaningfulness of the chosen word, along with its implicit cultural associations, may be missed in its common usage. Consequently, words are powerful tools of interpretation and must be closely examined to determine possible implicit meanings conveyed through the speaker's or writer's choice of language.

Textual Polysemy

Words may also convey a variety of meanings based on the contexts in which they are placed. Consequently, language must be considered evolutionary, since it changes in accordance with context, as well as with the needs and pragmatic concerns of a particular social culture. The multiplicity of meanings ascribed to a word as a function of its sociocultural context is known as polysemy. The polysemic nature of words means that they contain numerous intrinsic meanings, based on socially evolved and cultural usage, which acquire specificity only when used in a determinate context; consequently, attention to conceptual context is essential to both the production and/or reception of a relatively univocal discourse (Ricoeur, 1981). Since words become meaningful only within a nexus of sentences, the conceptual context must be used as a filter to eliminate surplus meaning. According to Thompson (as cited in Ricoeur, 1981), "To grasp this filtering effect is to exercise interpretation in its most primordial sense" (p. 12). Just as words acquire meaning as a function of context, so too are descriptive texts open to a multiplicity of potential meanings (textual polysemy) which also require context to achieve specificity.

During the processes of hermeneutic analysis and phenomenological description, it was essential, therefore, that the investigator remained attuned to the context of discovery because, according to Ricoeur (1981), "Sensitivity to context is the necessary complement and ineluctable counterpart of polysemy" (p. 44). As personal experiences are methodically transformed into written discourse, or texts, they become objectified representations of the projected lifeworlds of each individual and are thus distanced from the participants' intentions. As such, texts are then open to a variety of unique interpretations by readers from their own particular sociocultural and temporal perspectives. Since each text is also polysemic in nature, it remains open to numerous successive readings that could conceivably alter subsequent interpretations. Hermeneutic phenomenology, then, is a continuous process, devoid of permanent closure, always open to new interpretations.

The Value of Anecdotal Narrative

Narrative accounts, or personal anecdotes, of common, daily life events, provide a medium for participants to describe their experiences as they are 'lived', from their own particular situational perspectives. It is through such narratives that access to the practical worlds of participants may be gained (Benner, 1994). Personal anecdotes provide a powerful means of communicating difficult or elusive ideas and are commonly employed in phenomenological writing as examples of practical theorizing (Van Manen, 1990). Although participant narratives represent singular phenomenal experiences, they also serve an iconic function and, if taken collectively, can be used to illustrate the internal meaning structure, or essence, of a phenomenon so that a deeper understanding of the experience can be obtained. According to Van Manen (1990):

> The paradoxical thing about anecdotal narrative is that it tells something *particular* while really addressing the general or the *universal* (emphasis added)....And so one may say that the anecdote shares a fundamental epistemological or methodological feature with phenomenological human science which also operates in the tension between particularity and universality. (p. 120)

The storied nature of phenomenological texts makes it impossible to arrive at a single definitive description of an experience that can be generalized to all participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. Each narrative telling, and each subsequent text, must be considered merely one description, one possible interpretation, of an experiential reality within a world of possible experiential realities. Since participants' narratives are storied accounts of their personal experiences and realities, they were gathered as one form of data and as one way of coming to know about the participants' phenomenal experiences of spirituality.

Writing as a Method of Distanciation and Appropriation

Hermeneutic phenomenology is primarily a writing activity; it involves a process of writing, textual reflection, and re-writing that is aimed at producing thoughtful, evocative descriptions of existential experience (Van Manen, 1990). Sensitive phenomenological descriptions invite readers to imaginatively 'dwell within', or vicariously experience, the phenomenal world of 'other' (Benner, 1994; Ricoeur, 1981). Narrative accounts, as personal stories of phenomenal, 'lived through' experience must be transformed into written texts as part of the research process in order to facilitate reflection and interpretation. Once discourse has been permanently fixed in writing, or textualized, it is rendered autonomous and may, therefore, be examined and interpreted without recourse to the author's intentions. Texts, then, form the database for reflective discourse and hermeneutic analysis in phenomenological investigations. Each phenomenological description, if done well, becomes a thoughtful and evocative icon, an experiential exemplar of the phenomenon, the purpose of which is to reveal:

> ...those phenomenologically structural features of a phenomenon that help to make visible, as it were, that which constitutes the nature or essence of the phenomenon. In other words, every phenomenological description is in a sense only an example, an icon that points at the "thing" which we attempt to describe. A phenomenological description describes the original of which the description is only an example. (Van Manen, 1990, p. 122)

As the researcher begins to 'mine' the meaning from the participants' words and phrases, (s)he begins to move from the singular, concrete descriptions toward the universal, abstract 'meaning structure' of the phenomenal experience. Yet, this revelatory process of description must be done in a manner that preserves the 'uniqueness' of individual experiences while, simultaneously, exposing the *eidos*, or 'essence' of experience that is common to all real and potential examples of the experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenological writing is a method of capturing and revealing the hidden meaning structures of common, quotidian, 'taken-for-granted' life experiences. The process of writing (the research method) objectifies thought and, in a sense, distances the writer from the subjectiveness of experience (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). This separation from and objectification of existential experience creates a 'space' for reflection and interpretation; therefore, phenomenological writing is, at first, a paradigm of distanciation (Ricoeur, 1981). However, as the investigator writes, reflects, re-thinks, and re-writes, (s)he develops a deeper understanding of the embedded meaning of experience, and acquires heightened sensitivity toward new and unfamiliar life experiences (Van Manen, 1990). In order to develop a greater understanding of lived experience, the researcher must continue the process of reflexive writing until (s)he is able to intuitively "grasp" and reveal something of others' experiences (Boyd, 1993; McCutcheon, 1990). Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology is also, paradoxically, a paradigm of appropriation (Ricoeur, 1981) that draws investigators more fully into existential experience.

Investigative Strategies: Research Design

Methodological Structure of the Study

The goal of this research was to develop a "rich" descriptive, textual account of spiritual experience. Interpretations of individual accounts of "lived" experiences of spirituality permitted the disclosure of implicit meaning structures and led to the increased understanding of this phenomenon of interest. Hermeneutic phenomenologic investigation involves active participation by the researcher and the participant to uncover and co-create meanings implicit within an experience. This interactive process involved the merging, or fusion, of individual hermeneutic horizons, as previously noted, and led to the formation of textual narrative accounts of spiritual experience that provided the data base for this investigation. According to Van Manen (1990), it is the dynamic interaction of six research activities that forms the elemental methodological structure of hermeneutic phenomenological research, including: orienting to a phenomenon of interest; investigating the experience of the phenomenon as it is lived; reflecting on the essential themes of the phenomenon; describing the phenomenon through serial re-writing; maintaining a thoughtful, reflective relationship with the phenomenon; and balancing the research context by examining the relationship between the parts and the whole. These activities formed the underlying foundation and methodological template for this investigation of spiritual experience and should be evident throughout the written text.

Collecting the Data

A wide variety of data collection methods were employed to gather information for this hermeneutic phenomenological investigation, each of which contributed a valuable and unique perspective of the particular phenomenal experiences. Sources of information were chosen based on their ability to provide insight into spiritual experiences, or 'experiences of meaning' in everyday life; as such, hermeneutic phenomenology relies on purposive sampling. Although audiotaped interviews of participants who claimed to have had personal experiences of spirituality were expected to provide the primary source of textual information, data collection was not restricted to verbal inquiry but also included relevant literary sources, such as poetry, mythology, stories, etymological tracings, and the use of reflexive journals. Since any medium that facilitated or enhanced understanding of the spiritual phenomenon was potentially of interest to the researcher, non-discursive art forms, such as sculptures, paintings, photographs, symbols, and music were also used, as suggested by Van Manen, (1990). Despite the lack of linguistic encumbrance, symbolic art forms are, nevertheless, expressions of the artists' lived experiences and, as such, were included as illustrations of possible spiritual experience.

Locating Participants

Knowledge derived from lived-experience is, by definition, acquired from within the phenomenal field, or lifeworld, of participants. I had previously identified two individuals from personal acquaintance who claimed to have had meaningful spiritual experiences following perceived threats to their personhood and who had expressed interest in this study. From these two participants, I used a 'snowball' sampling method, whereby other participants were suggested by study participants based on their experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 1990; Wilson, 1989). The 'snowball' method involved asking the initial participants if they were aware of others who had had similar experiences and who might also be willing to participate. The initial participants were then asked to contact such individuals and request them to telephone me directly if they wanted information about the study and/or if they were willing to participate in the investigation. In addition to 'snowball' sampling, I employed purposive sampling to ensure a relatively homogeneous group of participants, each of whom had had a spiritual experience, to increase the credibility and possible future generalizability of the research findings.

Purposive sampling is a method of choosing participants based on particular characteristics, knowledge, or experience. For purposes of this investigation, the characteristics of spiritual experience in middle-aged and older women and existential crises determined the selection of participants. If an insufficient number of participants had been identified through 'snowball' sampling, I had intended to ask friends and nursing colleagues if they were aware of other individuals who fit the enrollment profile and, if so, planned to ask if they would contact these individuals to see if they would be interested in participating in the study. If the people contacted were interested, I asked that they be given my name and telephone numbers so that they could contact me personally for further information and possible enrollment in this investigation. In the end, both snowball and purposive sampling were employed to identify and enroll participants.

Much of the current literature related to spirituality suggests that spiritual development is frequently precipitated by stressful existential crises, or critical life events, that include instances of suffering and/or loss. Examples of existential crises extend to situations of personal loss, such as death (actual or anticipated loss of self or others), chronic, debilitating, and/or life-threatening illness (actual or anticipated loss of health or ability), intractable pain and/or suffering (actual or feared loss of control or coping ability), divorce (loss of anticipated future and/or relationships), and many other major life stressors (Bruner, 1984; Copp, 1990; Dougherty, 1990; Kahn & Steeves, 1995; Kreidler, 1984; Reed, 1983; 1986a; 1987a, 1987b; Younger, 1995). Therefore, I enlisted only participants who had undergone some form of existential crisis, or major life transition, immediately prior to, or at the time of, their spiritual experiences (see Appendix C). Additionally, much of the theoretical literature suggests that spiritual development increases with maturity and life experience. Consequently, participants were limited to middle-aged and older women who had had profoundly meaningful, transformational experiences following existential crises and who were able to provide an articulate account of their experiences (see Appendix C). Also, because a relatively homogeneous group of participants would enhance the credibility of the research findings, only women with similar educational and cultural backgrounds, and relative financial equivalence (ie. middle-class), were included. Men and children were excluded from participation since their spiritual experiences might have differed significantly from those of women and might have been precipitated by different antecedent events. As participants were located, I arranged to conduct the interviews in the participants' residences or in acceptable alternative locations of their choosing.

Interviewing Participants

My experience as a critical care nurse has often afforded me the privilege of interacting with individuals in crisis situations, particularly during periods when they were at their most vulnerable. While crisis events frequently include instances of suffering or loss, as previously noted, they may also include happier, yet also stressful, circumstances or major life transitions, such as marriage, the birth of children or grandchildren, or retirement. Although a review of contemporary literature suggested that spiritual growth could be precipitated by such 'happy' circumstances, the primary mediator of spiritual development appeared to be suffering (Goddard, 1995; Frank, 1991; Frankl, 1959; Reed, 1983, 1986a, 1987a; Younger, 1995). Consequently, during interviews with participants, it was important to determine the participant's perceptions of her existential crisis or major life change. During these interviews, I attended to each woman's personal existential experience of spirituality. Building a relationship of openness, genuine interest, and trust was essential to obtaining authentic, in-depth accounts of spiritual experience.

While it was not possible to predict with any certainty whether a second interview would be necessary, I anticipated that one to two interviews per participant would be sufficient to gather the breadth and depth of information that was required for this investigation.

Prior to conducting the initial interview with each participant, I reviewed the purpose of the study, shared information about my interest in spirituality, and clarified expectations regarding participation in this investigation. I provided each participant with an information letter to reinforce the purpose of the study (see Appendix A). I then obtained an informed consent to participate and written documentation of said consent, as per Appendix B. During the participant interview process it became necessary, from time to time, to introduce trigger questions into the conversations to generate a more complete description of the participant's spiritual encounter. Examples of trigger questions included:

* Tell me about a particular experience that you felt was profoundly moving, or meaningful, to you.

* In the weeks immediately prior to your experience, what major, life-altering events, or changes in your life or health occurred?

* When you had this particularly meaningful/spiritual experience, what were you doing? Where were you at the time (your surroundings)? What, if anything, triggered this experience? Did you call this experience by any particular name?

* What precisely do you recall of your experience? How long did it last? What was it like? How did you feel at the time (any particular sensations)? What were you thinking about? Were you alone at the time?...if not, who was with you?

* How has this experience changed you? How has it affected your life? Has there been any noticeable change in the way you think about or live your life each day?...your approach to people? Has this experience had a particular meaning for you?

* When you talk about your experience, what do you tell others? How do you feel about telling others about your experience? When did you first recognize your experience as 'spiritual'?

* Has this experience changed the way you think about your life?...living?...death? If it has changed your views in any of these areas, in what way have you changed?

* Since your experience, have you noticed any change(s) in the way you feel?...or in your health? How has this experience influenced your sense of loss or change in health (either in yourself or a significant other)?

Before beginning each interview, I requested permission to audiotape our conversation. Tape recording prevented information from being lost and ensured that interviews were accurately transcribed for later analysis. Participants were made aware that they were entitled to review and/or to receive a copy of their transcribed interview and were free to provide additional information, clarify statements, and correct misinterpretations. Each participant was provided with the opportunity to receive a complimentary copy of the final written thesis upon completion of the investigation.

Retrospection and Reflexive Journalling

Personal notes and theoretical memos relevant to the investigation, as well as annotated transcripts, were maintained throughout the study so that impressions, thoughts, and observations were retained for later reflection and analysis. As my understanding of spirituality evolved and increased, journal commentaries were expanded to include insights gleaned from other sources of data, including artistic and poetic expressions of the spirit. This method of journaling provided an additional textual data source from which insights could be traced, personal values could be clarified, biases could be confronted, and speculative impressions could be generated, reflected upon, and refined.

Analyzing the Data

In hermeneutic phenomenological investigations, data collection and data analysis are conducted concurrently. Thematic analysis of texts were the primary analytic strategy employed to interpret the textual accounts. According to Van Manen (1990), there are four fundamental existentials through which all human beings experience their lifeworld and that can serve as guides for phenomenological reflection and writing. The four existentials of phenomenological inquiry, which were used as an analytic framework for this investigation, include spatiality (lived space), temporality (lived time), corporeality (lived body), and relationality (lived relations). During the process of data analysis, transcripts, narratives, journals, and other textual materials were examined for dominant themes and central phrases that captured phenomenal meanings, illuminated core characteristics, and heightened understanding of the essential, or eidetic, structure of spiritual experience. Thematic analysis and coding comprised the first step in the process of phenomenological reduction, the means by which the internal 'meaning structure' of the phenomenon was revealed.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is primarily a process of reflective writing and re-writing. Van Manen (1990) states that reflective writing *is* the research. The writing process requires reflection and imposes linguistic demands that distance the writer from the lifeworld and permit the existential structures of experience to emerge from within the texts. Writing and re-writing textual accounts gradually produced a series of refinements in the expression of meanings embedded within participants' descriptions of lived spiritual experiences. The written texts produced during this process of reflection and distillation were thus 'reduced', leaving only the crystallized, essential 'liquor' of experience. It is during the phenomenological reduction that "one needs to see past or through the particularity of lived experience toward the universal, essence or *eidos* that lies on the other side of the concreteness of lived meaning" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 184). Non-textual data sources that illustrated core characteristics, and heightened understanding of the *eidetic*, or essential, meaning structure of spiritual experience were also considered.

Managing the Data

Data management was handled manually, with each participant's protocol typed on different coloured paper to facilitate ease of identification and sorting during the coding and clustering phases of analysis. As data collection proceeded, meaning units and key phrases from each participant's interview protocol were highlighted as a preliminary step to the application of code words. The accounts were then read several times in their entirety and a list of possible code words or phrases generated using the participants' words and phrases, wherever possible, to avoid the imposition of researcher determined categories or literary classifications that could bias the research, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (1992). Following the ascription of code words to the interview protocols, the transcripts were examined for similarities. As themes begin to emerge, thematic clusters were formed (an element of phenomenological reduction) to facilitate recognition of the meaning structures of each experiential description. Through a comparison of the individual meaning structures of phenomenal experiences of the spirit, it was anticipated that a common essence, or *eidetic* structure, would be clearly identifiable.

Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

The assurance of trustworthiness in hermeneutic phenomenology is essential to its acceptance as a legitimate and credible, alternative research methodology for developing nursing knowledge. From its inception, phenomenology was intended to be a "rigorous science" that produced knowledge of the world as it is 'lived' by individuals within it (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). Qualitative research, in general, and phenomenological investigation, in particular, has often been disparaged on the grounds that it lacks the 'scientific rigor', and hence the credibility, of the quantitative paradigm. Sandelowski (1986) suggests that the criticism of qualitative methods rests on its purported failure to explicate its methods of achieving reliability, validity, and objectivity, three criteria that underpin the logic and rigor of the scientific paradigm; yet, these same criteria are also of concern to qualitative researchers, albeit they are often identified with alternative taxonomic labels. The concepts of reliability, validity, and objectivity encompass four primary concerns: the truth value of findings, the applicability of research findings to other populations, the consistency of study outcomes, and the neutrality of findings (Sandelowski, 1986), all of which apply to quantitative and qualitative research alike. Within the qualitative paradigm, these same values are described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as credibility (truth value), fittingness (applicability), auditability (consistency), and confirmability (neutrality), and it is these standards that were used to assess the methodological rigor of this investigation.

Although rigor is an obligate facet of hermeneutic phenomenology, according to Sandelowski (1993), "...rigor is less about adherence to the letter of rules and procedures that it is about fidelity to the spirit of qualitative work" (p. 2). This does not suggest that trustworthy research is not essential, it merely implies that the pursuit of rigor must not proceed at the expense of authentic experiential meaning. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a discovery-oriented method of research that cannot be reduced to a particular set of steps or techniques, despite its stringent observance of principles designed to facilitate the articulation of strong, evocative, auditable, and authentic accounts of phenomenal experience (Benner, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Recognition of the richness and diversity of human phenomenal experiences, and a uniquely artistic approach to the expression of existential themes, are hallmark characteristics of phenomenological design.

Issues of Bias and Bracketing. In order to understand the phenomenal experience of another, one must be aware of one's own prejudgements, values, attitudes, and beliefs, or one's "fore-understandings", so that the unconscious projection of one's personal reality onto the account of experience will be limited (Benner, 1994; Gadamer, 1984). As previously stated, "The most fundamental condition of the hermeneutical circle lies in the structure of pre-understanding which relates all explication to the understanding which precedes and supports it" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 108). Because the interpretive process used for this research investigation would, therefore, be influenced by the "fore-structures" that form the "hermeneutic horizon" of all individuals, the researcher was required to demonstrate an intense level of self-awareness and disclosure of self-interest so that the study findings could be judged appropriately.

Some variants of phenomenology advocate 'bracketing' as a means of enhancing methodological rigor and reducing the potential bias that may result from the investigator's use of 'self' as the primary source of data collection and analysis. Bracketing is a process of reflectively examining and explicating one's assumptions, biases, and preconceptions and then attempting to 'set them aside' so that they will not influence the research process. Proponents of bracketing suggest that, by increasing one's level of self-awareness, the investigator is able to eliminate, or substantially reduce, the potential bias that could be introduced as a function of the researcher's hermeneutic horizon. Denzin (as cited in Patton, 1990) states that, since all investigators bring preconceptions to their research, "scholars must state beforehand their prior interpretations of the phenomenon being investigated. Unless these meanings and values are clarified, their effects on subsequent interpretations remain clouded and often misunderstood" (p. 476).

The presumption that a researcher can effectively 'set aside', or distance, himself or herself from personal experiences and knowledge that could potentially influence the investigation is questionable, at best, and many authors suggest that all relevant experience, including that of the researcher, must be included if it relates to the phenomenon of interest because it will enhance interpretation of the inherent meaning structure. These sentiments are entirely in keeping with the positions presented by the historical authorities on method, as previously addressed in the historical synopsis of hermeneutics and phenomenology. Van Manen (1990) suggests that personal experience is the natural starting point for phenomenological research because one's own experiences are the possible experiences of others and others' experiences are the possible experiences of oneself. Van Manen also offers an alternative explanation of bracketing as a means of suspending our assumptions and presuppositions that incorporates both of the positions described above. He states that:

> If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already "know," we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections. It is better to make explicit our understandings, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby expositing its shallow or concealing character. (p. 47)

Van Manen (1990) asserts that bracketing is a declarative process of increasing self-awareness that is but one component of phenomenological reduction; bracketing involves the ability to overcome one's subjective feelings and inclinations that could prevent the researcher from effectively grappling with an experience as it is lived through. He suggests that one must also be able to strip away any scientific or theoretical conceptions which overlay a phenomenon and that might preclude the ability to 'see' the phenomenon. Rather than attempting to 'set aside' one's personal perspective, the critical point here is that the investigator must examine his or her values, beliefs, preferences, and expectations, and to declare them openly, so that their influences may be evaluated by readers. It is through the processes of critical reflection on one's personal values, heightened self-awareness, and the *explicit declaration* of one's prejudgments and preconceptions, that the potential biasing influences of one's worldview are diminished.

Researcher Assumptions

Lipson (1991) states that a researcher's background, attitudes, education, emotions, professional training, and personality (in other words, one's hermeneutic horizon) can present significant challenges during data collection and analysis. The combination of past personal and professional experiences, academic preparation, and theoretical orientation have had a great impact on my subjective perception of this phenomenon. My family background includes being raised within a particular faith tradition and, hence, a propensity toward metaphysics, my educational pursuits and professional socialization have predisposed me to a moderate realist philosophy, and my experiences in clinical practice have precluded the rejection of any non-materialist notions of reality. Since these assumptions and prejudgments are not easily dismissed, they had the potential to introduce precognitive elements of bias into the investigation and were, thus, carefully articulated below and carefully monitored throughout the investigation so that their influences could be easily evaluated.

After examining a number of different paradigms, as part of my educational requirements, I determined that I hold a moderate realist perspective of reality; this worldview influences many aspects of my life and work and complements my understanding of Aristotelian philosophy. Moderate realism is built on peripatetic precepts that assert the duality of matter and form, of physical and spiritual, of material and immaterial. This perspective presupposes an objective, knowable reality that exists independent of our experience and is composed of natural and supernatural dimensions. The teleological nature of Aristotelian logic presumes an innate natural order, and the acknowledgement of a metaphysical dimension permits reflection on immaterial concepts, such as spirituality.

Although I subscribe to the view that an objective, knowable reality exists in the absence of sensory experience, there are others who reject such a stance and may adhere to a purely subjective, existential, materialistic, or monistic perspective of reality. Consequently, spirituality may be viewed as existential or transcendent in nature, the determination of which is dependent upon the underlying philosophical assumptions of the individual conceiver; a corollary of this view is a presupposition of multiple realities. My personal point of view regarding spirituality is closely aligned with Carson (1989), who states that "spirituality is a dimension within every person – religious, atheist, or humanist" (p. 11), and with Neuman (1989), who suggests that, although it is a universal characteristic of human nature, it may never be recognized or fully developed. I hold to the claim that spirituality and religiosity are related, yet ideologically and theoretically distinct concepts and that spirituality is immaterial, transcendent, and related to the greater universe. Further assumptions I hold are that this phenomenon can be known through experience and that there may be an *eidos*, or essential meaning structure of spiritual experience, that transcends individual, unique, and particular experiences of spirituality.

Although my personal philosophy is epistemically based in metaphysics, I recognized that this was not likely to be the predominant worldview of study participants and, since a purely existential notion of spirituality is antithetical to my conception of spirituality as immaterial and transcendent, a tolerance for ambiguity and the expression of multiple realities was required. Basic philosophical tenets of phenomenology include assumptions of subjectivism, holism, and multiple realities; it has been variously described as a philosophy, an approach, and a method (Benner, 1994). As a philosophy, these phenomenologic presuppositions are incompatible with a moderate realist perspective, yet, as a research method, these assumptions do not preclude its use. The focus on subjective, existential experience makes the phenomenological method eminently well-suited to an investigation of this nature. Consequently, during all participant interview interactions, care was taken to avoid undue researcher influence. As I framed questions for participants, I had to guard against language which was value-laden or reflective of a particular paradigmatic preference, because it could inadvertently shape participant responses and subsequent data collection, interpretation, and analysis. It was critical that emotions and feelings that reflected my underlying assumptions regarding spirituality not be transmitted through careless verbal and nonverbal communication because they would have had the potential to result in socially desirable responses rather than experiential descriptions of the phenomenon. Selective perception could have been problematic without my personal biases remaining in the forefront of awareness so that they can be evaluated during analysis. Theoretical categorizations, stimulated by my literature review, were fully acknowledged and reported prior to data collection and analysis. Although the literature review provided many valuable sensitizing insights, without acknowledgement, these could have potentially become superordinate to the discovery process and inhibited inductive pattern or thematic recognition.

A valid and reliable phenomenological description is one that is strongly oriented, richly described, and elucidates the existential experience in a way that creates a sense of verisimilitude and vicarious experience (Benner, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1970; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Swanson-Kauffman & Schonwald, 1988). As such, the phenomenological text reverberates with the reader and awakens a recognition of the phenomenon "as an experience that we have had or could have had" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 17). During the course of the investigation, participants were provided with opportunities to review their transcripts, to reflect on emerging themes and research findings, to clarify their intent, to recall additional details, to correct misinterpretations, and to confirm responses. These 'member checks', or verification with informants, are perhaps the single most important method of assuring the credibility of research findings (Bodgan & Biklen, 1992; Brink, 1991; Field & Morse, 1985; Glaser & Strauss, 1970; Leininger, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Omery, 1988; Patton, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986).

Considering Ethics

Since human participants were required for this investigation, ethical clearance to conduct the study was sought and obtained from the Health Research Ethics Administration Board. Because individuals who have had spiritual experiences might have been reluctant to discuss them with others for fear of considering them too personal to share or for fear of ridicule, particularly from anyone raised in a culture that reveres scientific ideals and rejects metaphysical claims, it was possible that participants might initially experience feelings of vulnerability when asked to recall the details of such experiences. Additionally, participants were requested to recount personal situations of existential crisis, such as extreme loss (whether real or anticipated), suffering, or impending death of oneself or a loved one. Consequently, along with the usual ethical considerations of informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and identification of potential risks and benefits, participants may require some additional considerations. They were provided with opportunities to ask questions, permitted time to pause and recollect, and assured that their stories and experiences would be respected.

Informed Consent. Since I already had the names of two individual acquaintances who had expressed interest in participating in this investigation, and who had had experience with the phenomenon, I followed up on their comments and requested their permission to enroll them in this study. Using the method of 'snowball' sampling, I asked participants if they were aware of others who had had similar experiences and asked that they contact these individuals to see if they were interested in participating in the study. Individuals contacted who wished to participate were provided with my name and telephone number by the original participants so that they could call me directly for further information and possible enrollment. I also asked friends and nursing colleagues if they were aware of other individuals who fit the participant profile and asked if they would contact these individuals to see if they would be interested in this study. These friends and/or colleagues were asked to give these people my name and phone number so that they could contact me personally for further information and possible enrollment in the study. Individuals who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate were sent copies of the information letter (Appendix A) and consent form (Appendix B). This provided potential subjects with an opportunity to reflect on the purpose and process of the study and to decide whether or not they would like to participate. Following a period of approximately one week to ten days, allowing for prospective participants to consider possible enrollment in this project, I contacted each of them by telephone to determine their decision concerning participation; the setting of the appointment constituted verbal consent to participate in the research study.

During the first meeting, questions were entertained to assure that participants understood the intent and terms of the investigation. Subsequently, the information letter (Appendix A) and the consent form (Appendix B) were reviewed and written consent was obtained from those participants agreeing to enroll in the research study. Prospective meetings were arranged for mutually agreed-upon dates, times, and places for the purposes of interviews and participant reviews of data transcripts, emerging themes, and phenomenological descriptions. The researcher stressed to all participants that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point in time. At the conclusion of the first meeting, each participant was given a copy of the information letter and asked to sign a consent to participate form, a copy of which was also provided to each participant.

Confidentiality and Anonymity. The anonymity of participants was protected through a variety of strategies that I explained in detail to each participant. Raw data was accessible only to myself, my research committee members, and the individual who transcribed the research interviews. Personal information known to these individuals was held in confidence. Interview transcriptions and corresponding tape recordings were identified by pseudonyms chosen by each participant. Names of participants and identifying characteristics were replaced with the chosen pseudonyms as the interviews were transcribed to protect the anonymity of participants. All personal information provided was and will be held in confidence, except where professional codes of ethics and/or legislation require reporting. Although the use of specific quotations for publication and presentation purposes precludes absolute confidentiality of the interview content, the anonymity of participants was assured by the removal of particular identifying characteristics and the application of selected pseudonyms to research interview transcripts. Audiotapes were kept by the investigator in a locked cabinet. Participant consent forms were kept in a separate locked cabinet and will be destroyed upon completion of this investigation. In current and future written reports of the investigation, the chosen pseudonyms will be used and every effort will be made to safeguard the identity of the participants. Individuals identified in interview quotations have also had their names changed and any identifying features have been removed. Despite any requisite changes made for such precautionary purposes, all attempts were and will continue to be made to ensure the accuracy, authenticity, and intent of the quotations. All audiotapes, reflective journals, and observations will be kept for seven years after completion of this investigation, at which time they will be destroyed. Interview transcriptions will be kept for an unspecified length of time and may be used in later research projects, as specified in the information letter provided to participants at the initiation of this investigation.

Risks and Benefits. Although there were no perceived risks to participants in this investigation, it was recognized that conversing about personal spiritual experiences and recollecting critical life events might have precipitated discomfort in some participants. If individuals became distressed at any time during or following the interview, I was prepared to temporarily interrupt and/or terminate the interview and offer to assist them to access appropriate resources. To this end, I compiled a list of community resource personnel, including psychologists, physicians, mental health practitioners, bereavement counselors, religious advisors, and alternative self-help and support groups that I could have assisted and/or directed participants to access, according to their particular preferences. Any participants requesting access to professional services would have received assistance, bearing in mind that the welfare of participants involved in this investigation superseded the objectives of the study.

Although there were no tangible benefits associated with this investigation, serendipitous gains may have been reaped by participants simply through their reflection on, and exploration of, their spiritual experiences and the opportunity to share their experiences with an interested person. Beyond such possible indirect benefits, participants may have derived some satisfaction from knowing that their contributions will contribute to an overall deepened understanding of spiritual experience, which could potentially result in increased sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of health and more meaningful care provided to health care recipients.

Chapter Three

Wonder is a state of mind in which...nothing is taken for granted...Each thing is a surprise, being is unbelievable. We are amazed at seeing anything at all; amazed not only at particular values and things but at the unexpectedness of being as such, at the fact that there is being at all.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

The Value of Narratives as Instructive Life Stories

The semi-structured interview protocol that was employed for this study included trigger questions that served to initiate and guide the research discussions. The reflection on past experience in response to the questions initially posed, however, led to the recounting of intimate personal life stories, or narratives. Each life story was a recollection and reconstruction of past events, personal 'facts' and 'truths' fraught with details, emotions, motives, and meanings that could serve an iconic function for future readers. As the project proceeded, the importance of the participants' *particular* stories became increasingly apparent; consequently, a deliberate decision was made to alter the writing process and to include a more narrative focus so that significant and illuminative details of context would be preserved.

The term *narrative* has a variety of meanings and must be clearly described to preclude misinterpretation of its use in this project and to illustrate its usefulness in qualitative inquiry in general and hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry in particular. In its common contemporary usage, narrative is often used to denote a form of natural speech or to refer to any type of prosaic discourse or text that is organized according to social convention into a coherent unity, or story (Polkinghorne, 1995); narrative, as prosaic discourse, is the primary type of data used by most qualitative researchers and is exemplified in interview protocols. Analysis of such discourse by qualitative researchers involves examination of a text in a search for primary linguistic structures and themes that embody the essential features of experience. Yet, despite the commonly accepted usage of the term 'narrative' as simply 'prosaic discourse', Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have recently suggested that a more limited definition be employed by qualitative researchers, one that implies a particular form of discourse, that of 'the story'. Story, in this sense, reflects Aristotle's famous comment, as paraphrased by LeGuin (1989), that a narrative consists of an "arrangement of [the] incidents" (p. 37) into a temporally ordered entity with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Through story, events and actions are pulled together into an organized structure in which contextual meaning and relationships between specific events can be clearly and comprehensively illustrated (Polkinghorne, 1995). Causality may be implied, although not specifically stated, through the elements chosen for inclusion in the story and by the sequencing of specific events (LeGuin, 1989).

The process of selecting events and temporally sequencing occurrences into a meaning-laden story with distinct temporal boundaries and specific outcomes is known as emplotment (Polkinghorne, 1995). It is through the plot that seemingly isolated events and behaviours are provided coherence and, through causal implication and purposeful sequencing, used to explicate the phenomenal meaning attributed to particular life events. Elements chosen for inclusion, as well as plot development, depend upon the anticipated audience for whom the story is being told and upon the purpose intended by the author. Nevertheless, the significance of particular events, behaviours, emotions, and actions to the story's outcome is not evident until the denouement, or climax, of the story has been revealed. Accordingly,

> To follow a story is to understand the successive actions, thoughts and feelings as displaying a particular *directedness*. By this I mean that we are pushed along by the development and that we respond to this thrust with expectations concerning the outcome and culmination of the process. In this sense, the 'conclusion' of the story is the pole of attraction of the whole process. But a narrative conclusion can be neither deduced nor predicted. There is no story unless our attention is held in suspense by a thousand contingencies. Hence we must follow the story to its conclusion. So rather than being *predictable*, a conclusion must be *acceptable*. Looking back from the conclusion towards the episodes which led up to it, we must be able to say that this end required those events

> and that chain of action. But this retrospective glance is made possible by the teleologically guided movement of our expectations when we follow the story. Such is the paradox of the contingency, 'acceptable after all', which characterizes the understanding of any story. (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 277)

Viewed in this manner, the contribution of certain occurrences (existential suffering, unexplained phenomenal experiences) to the participants' life stories becomes apparent only in view of the final outcome, or denouement (personal change and spiritual transformation) of each narrative. The story, then, becomes a conceptual schematic that encompasses events, actions, and context in a coherent unity, thereby acquiring its narrative meaning.

Stivers (1993) suggests that it is through anecdotal narratives, or the recollection, relating, and recounting of significant events, that people come to *know* themselves and each other:

> The sense of self is an essentially narrative phenomenon; people conceive of themselves in terms of stories about their actions in the world, using them to make sense of the temporal flow of their lives. We find identity and meaning as a result of the stories we tell about ourselves or that others tell about us. Therefore, a narrative approach to self-understanding is not a distortion of reality but a confirmation of it. (p. 412)

Anecdotes, or experiential narratives, communicate personal meaning and provide insights into what it is to be fully human. Baker and Diekelmann (1994) state that, "our stories of experience can [also] give others an inside-out view of the fires that have forged our beliefs, our caring, and our practices" (p. 68). Consequently, storied narratives, or personal anecdotes, can serve an heuristic function. Sandelowski (1994) states that (re)telling stories is also inherently therapeutic to the teller because understanding frequently attends the sharing of an existential experience. It is through the telling and retelling of stories that clarity of thought results and meaning is ascribed to particular experiences of a phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) refers to the stories derived through 'coming to understand' as examples of "practical theorizing" (p. 120) and suggests that the use of story is a common rhetorical device in phenomenological writing that has become a popular method of illustrating specific points in human science research and enhancing the understanding of difficult concepts and phenomena.

Kvale (1984) asserts that interviews must be considered as works in progress because they involve ongoing negotiated interpretation and co-creation of meaning throughout the interview process. The stories generated through in-depth interviews must be transcribed and are thus transformed into written texts for analysis. In other words, data must be "textualized" for "only in textualized form do data yield to analysis" (Van Manen, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 13). Once the text is 'fixed' in writing, it becomes autonomous and is amenable to interpretation and analysis because it is situated beyond the intentionality of the narrator (Ricoeur, 1981). The final written text reveals a particular remembered moment, a fixed standpoint in time, which will be preserved and interpreted uniquely according to the sociocultural, historical, and temporal situation of a particular reader. It is the process of "textualizing" interview data that presents the greatest challenge to qualitative researchers because it is in this act that a separation of voices must occur. It is the responsibility of the researcher to clearly distinguish his or her interpretations and views of participants, often inadvertently introduced through choice of language, from participants' own views because, "if there is no sharp distinction between investigator and field, there is also no hope of achieving 'unbiased' knowledge in the sense of knowledge unaffected by the researcher's constitutive assumptions" (Stivers, 1993, p. 416).

Polkinghorne (1995) suggests that the recently renewed interest in narrative research is warranted because narrative descriptions are naturally suited linguistic tools for illustrating human behaviours and actions as purposeful engagement in the life world. He further suggests that a storied narrative "preserves the complexity of human action with its interrelationship of temporal sequence, human motivation, chance happenings, and changing interpersonal and environmental contexts" (p. 7). A story, then, by its very nature, maintains the particularity of a participant's experience and diminishes the tendency toward abstraction that is typical of theoretical discourse (Van Manen, 1990). Consequently, in order to understand lived experiences more fully, it is essential to listen to many and varied participants' stories because they provide the context for understanding the attribution of meaning and, therefore, provide a window to human 'being'.

Generating Knowledge through Narrative Discourse

Narrative analysis is, increasingly, being employed as a framework for the investigation of phenomenal experience in qualitative research, as evidenced in the recent literary contributions of numerous authors, including Baker and Diekelmann (1994), Polkinghorne (1995), Ricoeur (1981), Sandelowski (1991, 1994), Stevens, Hall, and Meleis (1992), and Stivers (1993). This trend is warranted, according to Baker and Diekelman (1994):

> People live narratively and [that] *it is the storied nature of our existence that sets up the possibility for one of us to dwell within the lived experience of another* (emphasis in original)....Within this understanding, the narrative is seen to be transformative and connecting, always keeping open a future of possibilities. (pp. 67-68)

Thick descriptive accounts, rich in detail, and context-laden, are the hallmark of both eidetic and hermeneutic phenomenological investigation. Narrative can serve not only a descriptive function, it may also provide an explanatory function, a means for individuals to share the meaning attributed to particular events and experiences. Polkinghorne (1995) states that, "Stories are concerned with human attempts to progress to a solution, clarification, or unraveling of an incomplete situation" (p. 7). The stories are grounded in phenomenal experience, wherein individuals move from an initial situation or event (eg. – existential crisis) to a terminal situation or conclusion (eg. – spiritual metamorphosis). As such, narratives provide a means to fuller understanding of what it is to '*be*' fully human. According to Sandelowski (1991):

> The goal of narrative explanation is to provide an intelligible, comprehensive and verisimilar *narrative* (emphasis in original) rendering of why something happened that is well grounded and constitutes a supportable emplotment of events (actions and intentions). Explanatory narrative research...is retrospective and retrodictive in that: a) certain events

> in the past are interpreted as hanging together by being narrated into a story with a beginning, middle, and end; and b) a story must be ended before it can be explained. A life event is not explainable while it is happening; only when it is over can it become the subject of narration. (p. 164)

Traditionally, knowledge considered to be 'true' has been identified with rationality, hypotheses, objectivism, and systematic logic (ie. the 'scientific'method); however, in recent years, this assumption has increasingly been challenged. Bruner (as cited in Polkinghorne, 1995), an eminent cognitive psychologist, argues that narrative knowledge, just as scientific knowledge, is characterized by legitimate, thoughtful inquiry and informed judgment, albeit arrived at by a different, complementary, mode of thinking to that of 'science'. He differentiates the two modes of coming to know the world, or of constructing reality (ie. scientific method and sociohistoric method), on the basis of operating principles and criteria for completeness and coherence. He refers to the mode of knowing associated with scientific logic as *paradigmatic cognition* and the mode of knowing acquired through stories as *narrative cognition.* Both of these cognitive modes are critical to this investigation because it is in both the general and the particular that conceptual understanding must be found.

Paradigmatic Cognition

The primary function of *paradigmatic* cognition is the classification of particular events or instances into distinct categories or concepts (Polkinghorne, 1995). Each category or concept is defined by a specific set of common characteristics that is shared by all members of the group, the possession of which also distinguishes the said concept from all others. Paradigmatic cognition is focused on the specific characteristics that *essentially* define particular items or events as belonging to a category or concept; as such, is has to do with the *form* of an object, or *formal* thought, as developed by Aristotle and described by Adler (1978) and is, necessarily, abstract. In recognizing a particular item or experience as belonging to a particular category of item or experience, it becomes possible to use one's knowledge of the *general* (formal thought) to more fully understand the *particular*. Consequently, the power of paradigmatic reasoning lies in its ability to order experience through categorization.

A distinguishing feature of qualitative research is its focus on emergent concepts and themes that provide categorical identity to particular occurrences in collected data (Polkinghorne, 1995). Data analysis is a recursive process involving movement between the data and emergent themes in a constant comparison of data and testing of the power of emerging categories to order the data into a coherent conceptual schematic. The discovery of recurrent, essential phenomenal attributes provides categorical identity to events and permits the development of conceptual networks. Cognitive networks of concepts are thus formed that permit individuals to recognize experiences as familiar. The development of cognitive networks of conceptual categories is an analytic process accomplished through paradigmatic reasoning; it is the primary method by which human beings construct their experiential reality. It becomes apparent, therefore, that narrative analysis is akin to the method of hermeneutic phenomenology, for, in Van Manen's (1990) view, all hermeneutic phenomenological research:

> ...aims at elucidating those phenomenologically structured features of a phenomenon that help to make visible, as it were, that which constitutes the nature or *essence* [emphasis added] of the phenomenon. In other words, every phenomenological description is in a sense only an example, an icon that points at the "thing" which we attempt to describe. A phenomenological description describes the original of which the description is only an example. (p. 122)

Paradigmatic cognition is the form of reasoning used to analyze narrative discourse that is collected primarily in traditional hermeneutic and phenomenological research. It is used to identify commonalities across personal narratives as a means of generating general knowledge from particular experiences of unique phenomenal occurrences. Paradigmatic cognition is the basis of the *structural* and *thematic* analysis used in this research project, as described in the previous chapter, and will be clearly evident in the following chapter.

Narrative Cognition

The primary function of *narrative* cognition is the understanding of human behaviour through the illumination of specific differences in human action. It focuses on the diversity and complexity of contextual, temporal, and interpersonal interactions (Polkinghorne, 1995). Whereas paradigmatic knowledge is retained in conceptual categories and commonalities (universals), narrative knowledge is retained in contextually laden anecdotes (particulars) that preserve emotional and motivational meaning. According to Polkinghorne (1995):

> Narrative cognition configures the diverse elements of a particular action into a unified whole in which each element is connected to the central purpose of the action. Hearing a storied description about a person's movement through a life episode touches us in such a way as to evoke emotions such as sympathy, anger, or sadness. Narrative cognition gives us explanatory knowledge of why a person acted as he or she did; it makes another's action, as well as our own, understandable. Narrative cognition produces a series of anecdotal descriptions of particular incidents…The cumulative effect of narrative reasoning is a collection of individual cases in which thought moves from case to case instead of from case to generalization. (p. 11)

The challenge inherent within narrative cognition is to demonstrate the linkage between story elements and to illustrate their contributions to the outcome, or denouement, of the story. It is a *compositive* process, a *synthesis* of elements, as opposed to a reductive, analytic process. As such, narrative cognition is well suited to the task of hermeneutic phenomenology, the goal of which is to preserve particularity while also addressing the universal, or essential, elements of phenomenal experience, for, as Van Manen (1990) asserts, hermeneutic phenomenology is a method that focuses on enhancing human understanding by "reintegrating the part and the whole, the contingent and the essential" (p. 8), or the particular and the universal. Sandelowski (1991) suggests that it is critical that scholars "attend first to what is placed immediately before them – stories – before transforming them into descriptions and theories of the lives they represent" (p.

162). The greater the variety and number of storied narratives the greater the likelihood that one can recognize or recall a similar incident and develop a beginning understanding of a newly-presented situation and the greater the likelihood that one will recognize the differences between the cases. Consequently, narrative cognition forms the basis of the *compositive,* or *synthesized,* personal stories included in this research project in the following pages.

Stevens, Hall, and Meleis (1992) state that, although narratives do not provide a perfect means of distinguishing between general stereotypes of individuals and completely idiosyncratic notions, they do provide windows to human 'being' that permit the recognition of cultural values, shared beliefs, and similar experiences, while still preserving the diversity and particularity of each individual. Telling stories is a natural means of communicating information between individuals; it is a "strategem of mortality" (LeGuin, 1989, p. 39) and a way of living. LeGuin further describes narrative as "a fundamental operation of the normal mind functioning in society. To learn to speak is to learn to tell a story" (p. 39). As such, contextualized accounts of existential experience contain clues to the meaning attributed to particular life events by an individual and may, therefore, be conveyances of critical information. Sandelowski (1994) suggests that the dismissal of clients' stories of adversity and health as inconsequential and unscientific has contributed to the fragmentation of holistic care and the dehumanization of the health care system. Stories, then, may be of particular concern to nurses. Nurses are uniquely situated, by virtue of their privileged relationships with patients and their families, to hear personal health and illness related stories of experience and to attend to their inherent meanings for the participants. Through stories, nurses can come to more fully understand and appreciate their clients' experiences and unique needs and are more likely to incorporate such information into the planning and implementation of holistic care (Baker & Diekelmann, 1994; Sandelowski, 1994; Stevens, Hall, and Meleis, 1992). Because participant interviews in this study resulted in explanatory, or 'storied', narratives, it seemed prudent to attend to the rich descriptive detail and contextual nuances that would clearly illustrate both similarities and differences while still preserving the uniqueness and idiopathy of each recollected experience. Therefore, the inclusion of synoptic accounts of each participant's narrative was deemed to be critical to the integrity of the research project and a means of honouring the participants' life stories and phenomenal experiences.

In order to understand the actions, decisions, and attributions of meaning found in each participant's experiential account, it is critical that readers become privileged to the significant life details of the 'other' and come to *know* the person as an individual, situated within a family, with failures, hurts, hopes, dreams, and personal goals. Another significant reason for presenting synoptic accounts of the participants' storied narratives is to provide readers with the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of paradigmatic reasoning underlying the thematic analysis, as well as to judge the overall narrative explanatory power of each story. This will also permit readers to consider alternative readings and a variety of different, yet equally valid, possible interpretations of the participants' experiences. At the same time, including these stories allows readers to consider the influence and contribution of context, chance happenings, motives, and emotions on the final outcome of each life story.

In this study, stories shared were at once reflective and reflexive, for, as events and experiences were remembered and given voice through carefully chosen vocabulary (reflection on the past), they were also ascribed meaningfulness (reflexive response to the event) within a specified and unique contextual circumstance. The 'storied narratives' related by the women in this study clearly demonstrate the value of including synoptic stories for each woman, rather than simply providing illustrative exemplars in the discussion of emergent themes following analysis of the narratives. Each participant's personal storied narrative describes a sacred journey of crisis, spiritual growth, and transformative change and is pregnant with meaning and emotion. Each life story provides a rich source of information from which there were many invaluable treasures to be mined. Here then, are the 'storied narratives' of the participants and their accounts of spiritual transformation.

Storied Narratives Of Spiritual Transformation

A Constant Companion: Gloria's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I had heard about Gloria from several individuals who described her as "an inspiration", "a real example of spirituality", "a good friend and example of faith", and "a wonderful friend and spirit filled woman". I wondered if Gloria knew how special others thought she was…how extraordinary, in their opinions. Gloria is very involved in her church and in her community and, I had been told, has helped many others in their search for wellness in the midst of cancer. I was more than just a little apprehensive about conducting my first interview and I hoped I was ready.

Journal Entry

Gloria is a slightly stooped, gray-haired woman of 73 years with animated deep blue eyes and a broad, easy smile. She wore a brightly coloured skirt and blouse on this warm summer afternoon and we decided to sit outside on the deck to take full advantage of the fresh air and sunshine. Gloria is a wife of 51 years, a career homemaker, a mother of four, a grandmother, and a great-grandmother. She suffers severely from osteoarthritis and degenerative disc disease. She has a long-standing history of chronic pain related to these disease processes but pushes herself to stay active. She moves with studied care and some stiffness, but is cheerful, warm, and anxious to share her story if there is a chance it could help others. Gloria 'loves' listening to classical music, still plays the piano and organ (on 'good days'), volunteers as a literacy instructor, and occasionally even teaches the odd piano lesson, something she did for many years earlier on in her life. Gloria is also a breast cancer survivor.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born in Manitoba into a family with one older brother and one younger sister and I lived there until I was married. I met my husband in high school, although I didn't begin to date him until several years later. We've been married now for over 50 years and have four children, eleven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. In 1972, we moved to Alberta and, except for a 3-year period back in Manitoba right before my husband retired, we've lived here ever since. When we moved to Manitoba, we had to leave our youngest daughter behind because she was working and so, for the first time since our children were born, we were alone…and in a new city. We began to make new friends and were really enjoying this time with each other knowing it would be the last three years before my husband retired…and we were looking forward to that.

In early December of 1977, I went for my annual medical check-up and everything seemed to be fine. We had a wonderful Christmas together, and then, one very cold morning in January, I was standing in front of my mirror as I was getting dressed, and I noticed that one of my nipples was pulled in a little bit on one side. I thought, "Oh, that's OK, it's cold, it's probably just one of those things". For two or three days in a row, I noticed the same thing, but it wasn't changing so I wasn't particularly worried about it at the time. In the back of my mind somewhere, I remember noting that maybe I should go and see about it, especially if I noticed any further changes. So, I made an appointment and went to see my doctor who, of course, instantly made an appointment for me to have a mammogram. But at that point, I still wasn't at all concerned.

A few days later, however, the doctor called me and said he had some news for me. So I made an appointment and went in and…I will never forget it because I just barely sat down in the chair when he looked at me and said: "You have carcinoma and have to have a mastectomy, *now*!" And I remember saying, "what?" because it didn't register at first. He didn't say another thing beforehand…it was just one of those sudden shocks you get…and I thought, "I do?" He said he would and set up an appointment with a surgeon. The following Monday, my husband and I went to see the surgeon and that was when he explained to us what the surgery would be like, what I could expect, and why it was so urgent. He said he could show me, right then and there, why it was so dangerous and he asked me to bend forward from the waist. When I did that, I noticed that there was all this puckering on the outside of my breast; it looked like orange peel, you know, kind of with little dents. He said that was a clear sign of carcinoma. He also told me that the mammogram showed that the tumour was not encapsulated – it had these, like…*fingers* growing out from it all through the breast tissue, so it was very urgent. That was on Monday and…I was admitted to hospital on Thursday and the surgery was done the next day.

Now, I need to backtrack a bit here, to about a month or so before this happened, to provide a context for what was occurring in my life at that time. I'm a Christian, and I had joined a ladies bible study group looking for some fellowship, and so it was that I got very interested in reading the bible. I was alone for many hours every day, with no children at home, in a new city where we didn't know more than a couple of people and were just beginning to make friends, and it was pretty lonely and quiet. So I had plenty of time for reading, and I was reading my bible a lot. It seemed to me that every time I read *anything* in scripture, it provided me with assurances that I would be 'OK', that God was with me and looking after me and I had nothing to fear. This just went on and on…I was getting all this information about not being afraid. At the same time, there was a radio station I listened to sometimes that played beautiful music – it was a religious broadcasting station – and every time I turned it on, I was getting the same type of message.

When I went to church on Sunday, it was the same thing. No matter what I heard, or read, it was always the same…very positive, clear messages: *"You do not have to fear…don't be anxious about anything…put your trust in Me"*. I couldn't understand any of this, it didn't make any sense to me, and this happened every day for about a month. I just kept…sort of wondering what was going to happen because I didn't understand why I was getting this very *clear* message. So, when the doctor told me that day that I had carcinoma, I remember feeling almost… glad. I know that may sound strange, but I thought: "This is why I've been prepared. *This* is why all this has been happening to me over the past month"…and I had no fear. My faith began to grow from that moment on…and that's when the whole process of spiritual change began.

Anyway, after I left the doctor's office…I was alone and I had nobody to tell, so I went over to a friend's house, someone who I had known for about 25 years. When I got there, I just walked in the door. She knew I was going to see the doctor that day and she *knew*. She looked at me and she said: "Oh, you've got bad news", and I said, "Well… yes and no". She put her arms around me and we held onto each other and I cried. I think it was the shock of hearing, more or less, but even at that point in time, I was still wondering why I was feeling so good…there really was no fear whatsoever. When I left her house, I went home and phoned my husband at work. I told him what the doctor had said and he broke down…he closed his office and came right home.

When he got home, I remember, he was very broken…and fearful. We just clung to each other and I said: "It's OK. Don't worry. I really have no concern about all this…I *know* it's going to be all right". I remember phoning my daughters and they were all very upset and I said the same thing to them, too: "Don't cry…everything's going to be fine and…I'm feeling good". I couldn't understand the feeling, I really couldn't…it never happened to me before and…not quite since, either…this was really very unusual, too, because ordinarily, I'm kind of a worrier. We decided to really try to enjoy the week before I had my surgery. We went out for dinner and had a great time, never talked about it, and slept eight hours every night with no problems. All week I was aware that this 'thing' was there, but the doctor had said not to try to feel it, just to leave it alone and try not to worry about it all week…I did leave it alone…and I didn't worry about it, but I was very 'aware' that it was there. We had a good week and, through all this time, and even after the surgery, we became much, much closer to each other.

While I was waiting to have the mastectomy done, during that week, I had gone to my friend's church…for prayer. I had a 'laying on of hands' and I was 'anointed with oil' at that time…because I really believed in that…I still do. I had been a Christian for quite a long time, but I wasn't really thinking a lot about God, you know…I mean, He was there at meal times, at bed times, and on Sundays. I *believed*, but…He wasn't first in my life. I had had a couple of unusual, unexplained experiences in my late twenties and early thirties that had really made me wonder about God and His hand in working miracles in our lives, even when we're not really aware of it. That was when I first became *aware* of God's power…it was the first…it was kind of…an '*awakening*', so to speak… so, I guess I had become aware that there's a lot of power out there that we can tap into if we really believe. That was a real surprise to me back then…but, it was a beginning of sorts. So now, when I was getting all these messages of reassurance, I just kept wondering what it was that I was being prepared for…what was going to happen in my life.

That evening, when I went home, I knelt down beside my bed to pray. All of a sudden, with absolutely no warning, I started to speak in another language…one that I was not familiar with…and I wasn't sure what was happening right away because the church I was raised in didn't believe in this sort of thing. I remember feeling very awed… it just seemed so natural. A few months earlier, my husband and I had taken a course through the church we were attending and we had a very charismatic guest preacher who had explained a lot about the manifestations of the Holy Spirit, so I wasn't worried or anything, in fact, I was quite excited…but I didn't ask for it or anything. It just happened. This experience of 'speaking in tongues' happened about three days before my surgery and it was a confirmation of everything I'd been feeling…the peace…and the assurance that I'd be 'OK'…I had nothing to fear. I just surrendered myself…to the Holy Spirit and…to God…and I turned everything in my life over to Him. It was a very religious experience and it certainly reinforced my faith. I felt absolute joy and amazement, and I just kept thinking, "it's real…it's really real". I just felt so close to God…it really was a very spiritual experience.

I remember going into the operating room and the doctor saying: "You know, I can't feel that lump. It's a good size and I know it's there", but I couldn't feel it either. I had this strange feeling that I wouldn't need to have the surgery because I had received a promise that everything would be fine…I had nothing to fear. So, when I came to, I immediately looked and realized that I *had* had the surgery, but I still felt, "OK…at least it's over", and I never once felt, *never* thought I might die…it just never occurred to me then. When the doctor came to see me afterwards, he said: "I don't think we're going to give you any chemotherapy or radiation. We'd like to put you in a control group…we don't have to do anything because there were no cancer cells in the lymph nodes". I knew they had done some very major surgery because the incision started under my arm and went through my armpit and across my chest to the other side in a downward direction… they cleaned it out pretty good…and I never again thought about anything other than the fact that it was over, I was glad to be rid of it, and I was going to get well. I had a very positive mental attitude… and I knew that God was in control of my life and I just trusted in Him.

I was told by several close friends that I would go through a period of mourning, or feel a sense of loss, after the surgery but, you know, I never did…I was just so glad to get rid of it and relieved that I could get on with my life. I was in the hospital for a whole week and I have to say, I was on a high this whole time. Even the people that came into the bed beside me said that there was 'something different about me'…they didn't know what it was, but there was 'something'.

In fact, on the day of my surgery, the husband of the woman in the bed beside me came in to visit her and I was sitting up eating supper. He asked what I had had done…I told him that I'd had a mastectomy and he said: "There's something about you…you're almost glowing" …and this was a stranger…I'd never seen him before and not since. I just felt on a high the whole time…and I guess it showed. I do remember feeling a very brief sense of loss…but it was over a year later. I was getting dressed and I caught a glimpse of myself, in the mirror…I thought: "Ya, I lost a part of me"…and I shed a few tears. It didn't bother me after a couple of minutes though, but I do remember that there was a real, deep sadness…and then a gladness about being alive.

On the third day after my surgery, I had this experience…it was not nice …in fact, it was the most terrifying experience of my entire life. About ten after eight in the morning I told my roommate I didn't feel very well and I fell back in the bed…and that's the last thing I really remember for about four or five hours. I can only recall little snippets, like opening my eyes a couple of times and seeing curtains drawn around my bed and some people there. But I do recall feeling terrified…absolutely *terrified*…sheer terror. I could see faces all over the wall…green, yellow, red, and blue…disembodied faces… horrible, horrible faces…just faces and heads, no bodies or anything, just horrible…ugly…evil faces with short little horns…leering… threatening me…and I couldn't do anything. They didn't *say* anything, they just kept leering. I remember the sensation of being lifted off the bed…up to the corner of the ceiling and then being slammed down onto the bed again. It felt like I was being lifted up about six feet and then being dropped back down…and that happened a few times, a number of times. Once, when I opened my eyes, I recall these yellowish, orangey curtains around the bed…and I was surrounded by people…then I was 'gone' again. I have no idea how long that lasted…whether it lasted a few minutes or a long time, I really don't know. When I came around, they were doing a blood gas test and stuff and I didn't care *what* they did to me at that point. I know I came out of it around twelve-thirty but I don't know what happened in those few hours. Time simply disappeared…all I remember are the faces and the feeling of terror…and that lasted until well after midnight.

Later that day, my roommate told me I had really had everyone scared and I thought, "well, the only scare *I* had was the sensation of terror". Shortly after I came to, a young doctor came to see me and I asked him what had happened. He kind of hemmed and hawed and said: "well… it's because…that's part of your reproductive system and…because you lost such a big part of it, of yourself, your whole body just reacted to the loss…that way". It was so stupid, really. I just think he didn't know. The nurse said it could have been from the shot of Demerol and Gravol I had gotten earlier, but…I had had that before without any problem, so, I don't know. I felt I was under a spiritual attack…that Satan was trying to destroy the peace that I'd had and the assurance that everything would be fine. I really felt that that was an attack…and I overcame it and decided that he wasn't going to lick me…and I began to feel positive again.

By the next day, I started to feel better and I was back to feeling happy and relaxed…I still felt good. After I went home, everything went along well until I started having trouble with my arm…with infections and lymphoedema, which has continued on and off right up to the present. However, I've never been concerned, or worried, that the cancer would ever recur…its something that's never really even crossed my mind. I attribute that to the experience I had with prayer and the 'laying on of hands'…and then receiving the gift of tongues…that was such a life changing experience for me…there is that expression 'the peace that passes all understanding'… well *I had it*…there was no doubt. For a long, long time afterwards, I felt that happiness and joy. One day, just before I was discharged, one of my daughters came to visit and the first question she asked me was, "What's different about you?" She said there 'something' about my eyes…a sort of radiance…a 'light' or something and she told me they were 'different', more intense somehow. So I guess there was enough of a change in my physical appearance that it was noticeable to her. I know a number of ladies in my study group said they noticed a big difference too, and they wanted to know what had happened to me…besides the surgery…so, they saw something, too.

I guess *I* noticed the *real* change after I got home. I'd given a lot of thought to all of this while I was in the hospital, but that's a different atmosphere. When I got home and back into the swing of everyday life, I started to see that there had been a big change in me…I noticed some real changes. My attitude towards my family changed…I grew more loving. I *felt it*, in myself, that I should be more loving, caring, forgiving, and concerned for all my kids and grandkids. My husband and I became much closer. I became, perhaps, a *softer* person…and not quite so critical, because I realized life could end at any moment. That's when I became very aware of the fact that life *could* have ended…it didn't, but it *could* have. I was…I became much more aware what *life* is, and how to use it better. I became aware that the days were very precious…I felt almost like I'd been given my life back again. Even though I hadn't felt worried, I knew in my brain that it could have been the end. I became very aware of being *alive*, and very grateful for every day I woke up. Life took on a whole different outlook…it became much more precious to me. I was very appreciative and grateful for every day. I have moments of concern and anxiety about the small things sometimes, but if I just stop and think: "The Lord is with me. He'll never leave me, so why am I afraid?"…*that* has helped me a *lot*! There was only that one snag, the experience in the hospital, that was not nice, but it did not spoil the whole spiritual change that I experienced in my life. As I reflect back on it now, I think I knew in my *mind* that a change had begun in my life the day I first heard the so called 'bad news'; but then, when I received the Holy Spirit, I *felt* there was a distinct change. But I *really* noticed the changes after I got home. I still think I have a pretty positive mental outlook and I certainly appreciate every day. The changes that happened after I got home are still with me and I continue to grow and change. I still have a lot of chronic health problems but I'm grateful to be alive and generally pretty well.

A few months after my surgery, I needed to have physiotherapy on my arm and shoulder, so I had a lot of driving back and forth to the hospital – it wasn't very far but it gave me time to think. My husband and I were planning a trip to the States… and we were planning on driving. We had a car that was relatively new – it had been new, but we had only had it for a short time, so there was only about 20,000 miles on the tires. I was driving home one day and it was so clear to me…the word came into my mind…I *heard* it, but not with my ears…it came into my head or brain and it said "tires". I didn't think any more about it until I got home and told my husband… then, I said: "maybe you should go look at the tires". He went out to look and three of the four tires had the steel belts showing…so we could have had major trouble and, of course, we had to replace the tires right away. But that word…I can still almost 'see' it, but I 'heard' it…in my head. You just don't hear it with your ears. I know it was God's voice that I heard.

A similar experience happened when my husband and I were out shopping one time. We were having supper after getting groceries, and I said to him: "When we go home, I want you to move the sideboard off the south wall to the west wall of the family room". I felt a strong…like I *had* to do it…it just came to me. And I hadn't been thinking about this at all before then…and he just looked at me kind of strange because he hates moving furniture…plus the fact that when we got home it was eleven o'clock in the evening and we were tired. We put the groceries away and I said: "Now, would you go down and move that sideboard?" He didn't argue or ask why, he just said 'OK'. So he went down and moved the sideboard onto the other wall and, as I was standing watching him, the wall plug behind where it had been burst into flames. That was quite an experience…we could have lost our home. If it had happened after we went to bed, we could have lost our lives. Why…this sudden, very definite, 'thing' came into my mind…I don't know. That was another time we gave God the credit for…for protecting us…and for watching over us. I know He does…to this day. So I've learned to listen to His voice and His leading.

A day or so after that, my husband had to leave on a business trip and I was going to be left alone in the house. I told him I was quite nervous about being alone. So, he shut off all the fuses and all the power, except for the furnace, the fridge, and one light. He said he would be back the next day and things would be OK. Well, I remember kneeling down at the bed when I was alone and I said to God: "I'm nervous about a fire after what happened last night" and, again, I *heard* in my head, not with my ears: *"I am with you...sleep in peace"*. That was a lot of years ago as well…and I can recall that like it was yesterday. I *knew* God was with me and everything was going to be fine. So I've learned to be more sensitive and open to hearing what He has to say.

A Sustaining Faith: Amanda's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I looked forward to meeting with Amanda as I drove to her brand new home in the country on this bright, early winter morning. She had told me, when we spoke, that she and her husband of almost 30 years had lived with their five children in a mobile home for most of their married life, until moving into their new home a few weeks earlier, and she was clearly proud of the home they had built together. Amanda had been approached about my study by a friend who referred to her as "a very spiritual woman who suffered a cruel and tragic loss in her life"; she was, to many, a model of spiritual strength and resilience.

Journal Entry

Amanda met me at the door with a broad, beautiful smile and I was immediately struck with her vibrancy and warmth. She appeared trim and fit and seemed fairly aglow with health, wholesomeness, and natural beauty as she welcomed me into her home. Amanda's home was spotless and beautifully decorated – it looked like a photograph that belonged in an interior design magazine. We sat in the living room with a huge picture window that overlooked a large, park-like lawn and treed yard that provided a peaceful pastoral window onto nature and a definite sense of respite and repose. I could not help but appreciate the idyllic view and the warmth of the sunshine as her exuberant golden brown cocker spaniel cuddled up by my feet and her canaries chirped cheerfully in the background. Amanda had suffered a mother's heartbreak and worst nightmare when she lost an infant son to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Somehow, she had found the strength to overcome the suffering and sorrow inflicted on her by this tremendous tragedy in her life. She was a survivor and I wanted to hear her story.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born in the United States, just outside of Minneapolis, 51 years ago. About two years after we were married, we moved to Canada, to Manitoba, where we lived for seven and a half years before moving to Alberta in 1980. I've had seven pregnancies, and I have five surviving children ranging from eight to 28 years of age. One of my pregnancies ended in a miscarriage and I had one son who died from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) at 32 days of age.

I was born into a Roman Catholic family…well, my dad wasn't Roman Catholic, but he supported my mother in that he took us all to church every week. And we went to Sunday school and summer school at the church, so we had quite a good heritage of church-going. I never fully understood the whole 'becoming a Christian' message, though, because that was something that wasn't really taught back then. I remember 'speaking' to the Lord in prayer, and I had absolutely no question about His existence at that time. I knew about God and I prayed to Him and believed

He was a friend and that He could comfort me, but I didn't really have to rely on Him the same because my parents took care of me. I was the oldest in my family and my parents taught me a lot about responsibility, so, when I got married and had children, that really 'kicked in'. I had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and duty and I realized that I was responsible for people... little people, and life was different on this side of it than when I was a child. So, I had 'religion' in my life from my earliest memories. When I was eighteen or nineteen, I decided to go my own way for a while. I stopped going to church...I think I became 'too sophisticated' to pray. I didn't think I needed God and the church in my life at that time and so I just left that all behind and went on about my life. It wasn't until Daniel died that I began to wonder if that decision had served me very well...because I was left really floundering and struggling at that point with having *any* faith. Until the day that Daniel died, I had never questioned the existence of God – even though I wasn't attending church or praying, I never doubted that God was real.

When we first moved to Alberta...I didn't realize that I was pregnant...I found out about a month after we moved. I didn't know a soul here and we were living in a small mobile home out here in the country...I had two young children and was expecting a brand new baby, so it was a very difficult period in my life. Then, just over a month after my third child was born, he died unexpectedly from SIDS, and that turned my life completely upside down. It was absolutely...so horrendous...and I began to wonder what life is all about...you know, whether life is really worth all the pain...and I had to answer some pretty serious questions. When I first saw Daniel in his crib and realized that he was dead, all I could say was, "Oh God...*No*!" I was so panicky and filled with fear at that point that, after those first words, I lost it. I was in such a fog...I remember just being really numb all over, physically and mentally. Even my teeth were numb, I couldn't feel them...it was a very strange experience. I wasn't really 'recording' either during that time... I was in shock...and living in a fog...that part is a bit of a fuzzy memory. For about two or three days, I questioned God's very existence. I *desperately* wanted to believe that there *was* a God and that this all made sense somehow...but I was really unsure. I was in shock and so traumatized…"If God existed, how could He let this happen?" This was the most horrendous thing I had ever gone through and…probably the most horrifying part of the experience was not really knowing if God even existed – it shook my very roots and made me question everything. The strange thing is, even though *I* was missing an awareness of God completely for a few days, I knew that Daniel was with God. I know that doesn't make any sense, but I never worried about him. For *him*, I could believe but…beyond that, I couldn't. That place I was in after Daniel first died was pretty life-threatening…I didn't know if God even existed and I didn't know if I could bear the pain of that experience. Even though I had a loving husband and two other children, it somehow didn't seem enough. I tried and tried to make sense out of this and somehow… through my fog…in that state of shock…I gradually became aware of God again. I wanted to know…I *needed* to know there was some meaning to all of this. I didn't understand why he had died…I'd done all the right things. I'd nursed him and I'd had him near me all the time…I guess you just don't ever think that bad things are going to happen to you… they happen to other people. Right after Daniel died, the very next morning, I went home to Minnesota to be with my family.

After two or three days of questioning and uncertainty, I started to develop an assurance, once again, that God *did* exist and was, in fact, undergirding and supporting me. I went from *not* knowing to *knowing*. I can't really explain it, but I knew inside of me that I went from having that empty place…I've heard it said that each of us has a 'God-shaped' place inside of us that only He can fill…that spot was really empty in me for a few days…and then it was full again. I *knew* that God was there…I *experienced* His presence…He gave me an assurance that He was there with me…and a *peace* that I just couldn't explain, and I knew He was with me, *in* me. So that was a real turning point in my life.

When I came back from Minnesota after Daniel's death, we started attending church and God started bringing some people into our lives who liked talking about God and sharing their experiences and I began this gradual growing process. I think I feel the most vibrant now when I talk about my relationship with the Lord…He has given me such an openness and intensity…a real joy and zest and appreciation for life. I think that my relationships with other people have really changed, too. I look at people differently now because I understand…I don't think I understood before what a 'fallen nature' was, and now, that's always part of my perspective. Because we all have a sinful nature, we're naturally selfish, so I think knowing this has made me more generous in my appraisal of other people's behaviour. They don't set their will on being nasty, its just part of the nature of humans, so I don't feel so much 'done unto' by others…I just don't personalize slights so much. Without the power of God in my life, I know I'd be doing selfish things that could have ill effects on those around me. I think just knowing this really helps to soften me and help me understand others more. I know there was a long time that I really held my parents responsible for all my flaws and now, because I have been given such an incredible love for my parents, I don't feel that's part of my relationship with them anymore. I know they did their best with what they had, so now, I just love them and let go of those feelings I had because I know that if I keep using them as an excuse, I will never grow.

Another thing that really changed in my life…my relationship with God was very private all those years growing up. I never talked about God and I never knew anyone who talked about Him, either. But after God brought me through that experience, I began to share it with others – I loved talking about my relationship with the Lord, and I still do. There are very few situations when I'm talking to people where somehow my relationship with God doesn't enter into it. I'm not really an evangelist…I don't *preach* the gospel, but I sure talk about my personal experience with God. I really depend on the scriptures, and I read them a lot – they empower my life. To me, that was a tangible change…that I can share my experience…and that was a change that was evident to anyone who knew me.

When I let God back into my life after Daniel died, I really began to rely on His power… and I experienced such a *peace*, such an assurance of His presence…and I had a great *joy* come into my life. No matter what…even through the terrible times of fear that I've gone through, that joy is rock solid and helps to provide some balance in my life. And I *know*, because I've lived through it, I *know* that I can live without…I can lose people in my family. I believe I can lose everything and I still have enough with having the Lord in my life. I *know* that's true because…I *haven't* lost everything… but, in a way I *did*. When I lost Daniel, I felt like I *had* lost everything because there was nothing at that point that seemed valuable enough to move me forward. I mean, my family had become my whole life, but I realized that that wasn't enough. As much as I loved them, that wasn't enough. Now I know that Jesus is enough and I *know* that's true for me because He's already seen me through an experience that…well, I may go through worse but, to me, that was pretty well rock bottom…having what seemed like everything of value in my life taken away. If God can see me through that, I know there's something, some*one* pretty powerful there who's in control. When I'm walking through the darkness, I know that God is with me. It's like…when you go through a pitch dark room – it still frightens you to do that but, if you know that you're not alone as you're walking through that room, it's a different experience.

Daniel's death really opened up my eyes to the evil that was in the world and that's what I think scared the living daylights out of me. I don't think I had any sense of the evil or the dangers in life until the year we moved. I was lonely and isolated, away from friends and family. I felt like I was under such spiritual attack that whole year…although I didn't understand it as that until much later. All of a sudden fear crept into my life for the first time. I had lost a child and come into contact with the evil that was in the world and it was raising havoc with my mind. At first, I had a lot of guilt over Daniel's death; I just kept thinking maybe I could have done something… but later, I do remember talking to my sister-in-law and at some point saying that I really believe we cannot influence the day we die. We may be able to influence the *quality* of our life, but not the *quantity* – God is in control of that. I do believe that, ultimately, I hadn't done anything that could have dictated the day of Daniel's death, but it did take a little time to really accept that.

Before Daniel died…he died on Tuesday morning, and the Friday morning before that he woke up and he was vomiting…he vomited off and on all that day, but he was still nursing. Then, the next day, he wasn't nursing; he was just sleeping all day. We tried to feed him small amounts of fluids…and that started to worry me because he was so little and he really wasn't eating. The night before he died, though, he woke up and he nursed on both breasts…and I was loaded with milk because I was also nursing one of the other children. So then I relaxed because I thought: "Oh…he's getting better and things are going to be all right"…but then I woke up two or three hours later and he was dead. I think that that's what bothered me and why I felt guilty… that he had gone that period of time with not much to eat…and I wondered if that had anything to do with his dying. But now, when I reflect on that, I am really quite grateful to the Lord that He allowed me to nurse him before he died because I think that would have just *really* haunted me.

After Daniel died, everything changed. God was back in my life…and He was still comforting me and being my friend, but now I needed Him to get me through life. God had to be the…I needed Him and His power in my life. I needed Him to walk me through a life that I knew there were dangers in now. I wasn't a child anymore, I was aware of what could happen in life… that it was *dangerous*. Life had its dangers and now *I* was also responsible for other people. That weighted heavily on me and I realized that…even doing everything 'right' isn't enough…I needed something more than that. I needed someone – *God* – in control and I wanted to depend on *Him* to keep me on the right path and to get me through life. The relationship that I had had with God as a child was restored, but now it had matured…it had added aspects to it, my dependency on Him was different.

After Daniel died, even though I had been given this gift of faith and was assured of God's existence and abiding presence, I became very, very fearful. I developed a terrible fear that everybody I loved was just going to die on me all of a sudden. I had to scoop the other kids off to the doctor to make sure they weren't going to die too. I realized how little control we really have over things. I know now that is wasn't good for me to be so isolated during that time and, to lose a baby on top of that…despite my faith, I have been struggling with this legacy of fear on and off for almost 20 years, yet I *know* that God is in control. When this fear rises up in me, it's not only *emotional*, and I know its *spiritual* because I feel the spiritual attack, but it's also a *physiological* experience…every part of my body reacts to that fear. I feel like I'm going to throw up, I get diarrhea, and I get terrible…I get such a reaction. I get a pain that goes up the side of my face and down into my chest…and my ears start to go red. I feel awful. However, even when I was experiencing this terrible fear, there was a balance in it somehow…the Lord was walking me through it even while I was still having all the physical sensations of being fearful. I knew that He had seen me through it because I certainly didn't have the ability to get through it by myself – I didn't have it within me. I would simply have dissolved by myself. The fear was paralyzing – I could never have made it without the Lord carrying me through. Fear can be very hellish because it robs you of everything else in life – no matter how much you possess…no matter how many blessings you have in life, as soon as fear gets in, it just removes every bit of enjoyment from all of that. So I'm learning to master my fear. Sometimes I get quite down on myself because I feel that…somehow…my faith should overcome my fear, or cancel it out…but it doesn't always take it away…so I'm finding that I need to be disciplined with myself and not give in – I have to turn my fear over to the Lord right away, and then I know He'll get me through it.

Fear has been my one big struggle but, ultimately, I know that no matter what happens, God is doing the very best for me and He will work everything out for good – I don't ever doubt that. That knowledge is unshakeable and never wavers. I'm so thankful for the faith that He has given me – it has been a real gift! Except for that 'dry period' of about twelve years, I've always had the Lord in my life; but my relationship with Him is very different now. I know that…during that dry period, I knew that *He* hadn't turned his back on *me*, *I* had turned my back on *Him*. My family had become my whole world – I was enjoying being newly married and a new mother and all that and I guess I just felt I didn't need that in my life at the time. In retrospect, I can see there was a real vacancy there. I feel I lost a lot through those years that I turned my back on the Lord.

God has helped me to get through so many difficult situations…He's helped me leave the rubbish behind – He provides healing…then I can move forward and I become more 'whole'. I have no doubt about that because…I just believe that every part of us – physical, emotional, and spiritual – affects the way we feel, affects our health, and helps us to be 'whole'. But I still think there's a lot of 'healingness' and 'wholeness' that have to take place in my life.

I think that the *biggest* change in the way I *live* because of my faith and my relationship with God is that now I know, no matter what happens, no matter how things look, that God is working it all for good. I'm always waiting for the good because I know that it's a *process*. No matter how bad it looks now, it's in a process of becoming good, because God promises to do that in my life and I always see that to be true. So, whereas before God was back in my life, I would go into a frenzy when something went wrong and think I had to personally fix it, or that I was somehow responsible, now I know that God is in control and, no matter how things look at the moment, it's in a process of being worked out for good. It may take a while to receive answers to some prayers, but it only takes as long as a snap of the fingers for Him to provide encouragement. So there's a real sense of trust …I love the faith that God has given me, it's just so sustaining.

There is one other area in which my life really changed when God came back into my life and that is in my attitude. Now I'm not talking about the big things in life…I'm referring more to the everyday issues and tasks of life – a lot of them really aren't all that pleasant. For example, we have to go in every so many weeks and clean the church, and it's hard to have a good attitude about cleaning toilets and all that, but I think the Lord has taught me something about attitude. I approach those things so differently now – whereas before, I would still do things like that, now I do them more freely, because life is too short to do anything without a good attitude – and I seem to have such a great outlook on life. So, if my initial response to any job is that it's distasteful, I don't just leave it there – I pray that God will change my attitude because I've reached the point in life where I'm not willing to do anything without the right attitude. I won't go in and to the job with a poor attitude because I don't think God has any use for that. So when I do a job, such as cleaning the church, I approach it with a 'right' attitude, an attitude of service – and I do it joyfully and then I always come away with a blessing. A good attitude makes the work lighter – it doesn't seem like a burden…and I come away feeling blessed…so, I win on every front.

An Emerging Trust: Hannah's Story

Researcher's Reflections

People talk about Hannah with admiration, warmth, and respect. Within her church, everyone knows Hannah, she is well-liked and affable to all. I knew that she had had a very difficult childhood and was still recovering from some of her early memories, yet she sounded cheerful, open, and willing to explore her past traumas and spiritual journey with me, for which I was very grateful. Hannah described herself as a very involved homemaker who is completely committed and deeply devoted to her family. She is an extremely bright, 'fortyish' woman who struggles continually with her weight and who maintains a schedule of volunteer activities that appears daunting to even the most seasoned of community-minded citizens.

Journal Entry

I met with Hannah in her home on a sunny spring afternoon while her children were in school. We sipped coffee as we conversed, comfortably cushioned in deep leather softness, basking in the warmth of the afternoon sunshine. Hannah sat surrounded by paintings and crafts, products of her overtly artistic talent. She was warm, friendly, and sincere, with a rapier wit and a delightful, if somewhat devilish, sense of humour. Her pale blue eyes sparkled with life, she smiled easily, and her infectious laugh sliced through any remnants of tension or formality, yet she was open, sincere, and straightforward in all her responses. Hannah was a survivor…she was also somewhat of an enigma…our time together left me with much to think about.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born and raised in a home with five brothers and sisters on a farm in central Alberta. I left home when I was seventeen and moved into the city with the intention of attending school again in the fall, but I got a job instead. I have been married for almost eighteen years and have two young sons. I don't really have a lot of clarity about my childhood – most of my memories are clouded with scenes of physical and sexual abuse. I had a brother who molested me from when I was very young until I was in junior high school. My sister witnessed an incident when I was five years old, so I know it started when I was very young. I don't think about my childhood a lot because of those memories. I don't really know why, but the sexual abuse stopped when I reached junior high – after that age, he seemed to lose interest.

It's amazing to me that this abuse happened and went on for as long as it did because there was such an importance placed on religion in our family. Going to church was a really big deal, but it was also a 'look good' thing. Dad was very involved in politics and family appearances were everything. He was very, very strict, and it was important to him for the family to appear intact…and, it wouldn't look good if we didn't go to church. Growing up, I felt that religion was really controlling because my mother would often use what had been said in church to 'get after' us. Mom and I always had an absolutely volatile relationship…she was very, very hard on my sister and I. As an adult, I've grappled with that and I wonder if, in her own way, she knew there was something 'wrong' and chose to keep us at arm's length rather than dealing with it.

I tried to tell my parents about the sexual abuse on a couple of occasions but I wasn't very successful; I told my dad that Paul had shown us his private parts. And he took him to see the priest. I think that dad wanted so badly to believe that it was 'fixed', that he never dealt with it beyond that. I know there were some hints on my part, and on my sister's part, to tell my parents but they were pretty indirect, very childlike. One time my sister went to my mother after having witnessed an instance of abuse with me and she had asked my mom not to leave us alone because Paul did mean things to us when they left…and mom just took that as, you know,…being 'mean'. I know she didn't really understand at the time. Instances where I tried to grab her attention were pretty subtle too, you know. I know that I was very, very angry as a kid. There was one time when we were going to go to town and mom told me I had to mow the lawn before I could go, but she was all ready to go. So, I went and put sand in the lawnmower so it wouldn't work and I would be able to go with her. Well, she caught me putting the sand in the gas tank and she just came unglued on me and called me a lazy such and such. It was just awful and I thought, "no – that's not why I did this" and then I saw her as this mean, mean lady. I ended up writing her a note saying "I hate you" because there was an incident with my brother while she was away…and then I got in trouble for writing the note. So I grew up with no real relationship with my mom.

Growing up I was really easily influenced by what people said. My whole understanding of who I was and what kind of person I was came from what I was told…and I was taught from a very young age that I was a 'bad kid'. I was pretty confused because I knew I was involved in 'things' that I had heard at church were wrong. I didn't realize that these 'things' were being perpetrated on me…I just knew I was involved. So the very religious emphasis that was in our home just added further to the condemnation that I felt already existed towards me...and that I had accepted as my own. I knew 'it' was wrong, yet I was doing it. I couldn't separate the reality that someone was doing it *to* me, I believed *I* was doing it. So, my whole understanding of spirituality and of God was very warped.

When I finished high school, I left home and I got a job. I never went back to school at that time because I had so much fear in my life. I was *afraid* of going to school. I was afraid of going to the parking lot and having to walk into the school in the dark. Like, what if one of my classes was in the evening and I had to walk alone across the parking lot? I didn't - I couldn't do it. I always had these memories of my brother in the back of my mind and I was afraid of what would happen if I was alone, going to classes in the dark. And I didn't really have a belief that I *could* do it. I was convinced that I was bad and that I was stupid. So I decided not to go back to school.

My very, very first experience of something...spiritually focused, other than the religion I grew up with, occurred when I was about eighteen. It was about the same time that I met some people who were involved with an Evangelical church nearby. I got involved with the church simply because I was invited. I think there were people there who believed I had had a spiritual conversion, but I hadn't. Someone had just asked me to go and...I couldn't say 'no' because I couldn't find a good excuse not to go. I don't really know if acceptance from these people was the key to my going, but being there sort of raised my awareness...my interest...I was curious. When I first left home, it was like... 'I am free'. I hit central Alberta with a vengeance and began to live a very wild lifestyle. I mean, I really went wild! And I did find acceptance...but I found it in bars...and in the drinking crowd. So on the one hand, I continued drinking and living a very wild lifestyle and, on the other hand, I went to the little church functions and activities with the people that invited me to do that. I was living two very different lives and I was trying hard to keep them from colliding. Gradually, I think it just became clear that this wasn't working for me. At the same time, I had started dating a Christian fellow whom I met through the church, and he helped change my thinking, too. In retrospect, I can see that it was God's hand in all of this.

About the same time, I had a particular encounter with a person who had a significant influence on me…it was a turning point in my life because it really got me thinking more about God. I had always felt that God could never accept me as one of His children because I wasn't good enough. No matter how I behaved or what I said on the outside, I knew on the inside that I was not good enough. So, I learned to 'put on a mask' when I was there. Anyway, one day, I had a conversation with a gal who had gone on a short mission trip, and she asked me whether or not I had ever accepted Christ into my heart. And I had said no. And she had asked why. And I can remember telling her because, you know, I'm just not there. I don't want to give up such and such…and I sort of gave her my list of all the things I thought I would have to give up. And she said, "You don't have to give up any of that. That's not at all what God is about". That was probably the first time anybody had shared with me that God accepts you *"just as you are"*. You don't have to do anything…you don't have to get clean…you don't have to be good to do this…God loves you *just as you are.* And that was probably the first time that I really heard that.

Over a course of time, I thought about this and I stayed involved with the church and joined a Bible study and I gained a lot of 'head knowledge', but it really didn't get into my spirit until later, through a gradual series of events. Several things happened within a very short period that led to an awareness that God was really *'real'*. Three people in our family were, all of a sudden, in real crisis situations with their health. I had a nine-month old nephew who was diagnosed with leukemia. He was a very sick little baby and we really thought he would die. The very next day, we found out that one of my nieces, only a year old, had also been rushed to Edmonton and that the doctors weren't sure if she was going to live either. It ended up that she had Cystic Fibrosis - she had been losing weight rapidly, but until then, no one had figured out what was wrong.

A few days later, that same weekend, we were supposed to have gone to stay with friends, but because my niece and nephew were in the hospital, I called our friends and told them that we were not going to be able to come. My friend was very disappointed and told us they had already made up our bed and everything and we just chatted for a bit. I called her Friday and, that evening, during the night, their trailer burned to the ground. They had a propane fire and an explosion, and the bedroom that we would have been staying in…that whole end of the trailer blew up. Nobody in that room would have survived. When they phoned and told us about the fire that next day, I just sort of thought, "what next?" But, as I thought about that over the next couple of weeks, I became aware that, if we had been there, we would have been dead. We would not have lived through the fire and, I think at that time I began to wonder, "why were we spared from that?" It took some time for the significance of that to sink in. There was a *purpose*. For some reason, we hadn't been there. What had protected me from that?

After the phone call saying that their house had burned down, I laid down on the couch and decided that I was not going to answer the phone any more because I couldn't handle hearing about anything else. I remember praying and asking God to touch them and not to let anything else bad happen. I needed to believe that God was going to do something. By then, I had been immersed in religion, so I thought maybe praying was at least *something* I could do. I knew that I needed something, or someone, bigger than me, so I decided to pray. While I was laying there, I thought my husband had come and put his hand on my shoulder because I physically felt a hand on the back of my shoulder, and when I turned around, he wasn't there. I felt like…"that was God's hand on my shoulder." I *knew* when I felt the hand on my back that God had heard me. I think that was sort of a turning point for me as far as believing. *That* was impossible to deny.

Overall, I think that my spiritual growth has been primarily a process of change. It's been something that has evolved; I don't think I really understood that it was a process or how much it had evolved until 1996. Back in the late 1980s, I had taken the first step of sharing some of my past abuse with the women in a study group I had joined. Telling someone was really significant to me because it meant it was no longer a secret. I don't trust people very easily. I think I'm getting better about it now but I certainly had issues about it when I was younger. Although I was still very guarded with who I told, I felt good that '*I had trusted somebody. I had told someone*'. Unfortunately, I didn't get a lot of help from these women. Their version of help was that they would pray for me, and they told me I should 'give it to the Lord'. I know they were incredibly sincere in saying that…but I had no idea what it meant.

My mother was diagnosed with a progressive neurological disorder and by the last year of her life, she couldn't communicate verbally. I don't know why, but it was really important to me that she have peace with God before she died. I definitely knew that I wanted that for her because religion had always been a big part of her life. By then, I'd sort of decided to try to love her unconditionally…I think that she finally did find a peace with God before she died. The night my mother died, something really significant happened for me. I *knew* my mother was going to die this particular night. I even confronted the nurse and told her she needed to tell me if mom was going to die because my family had to come from a fair distance. She wasn't very comfortable with that and told me it could go on a long time, but I *knew* it was going to be that night. I called the family to say we all needed to be there that night, so everyone came. Earlier that evening the nurses had placed a bowl of ice and a fan in the room to keep mom cool because her temperature had been so high. We were all standing around her bed when she passed away - the nurse was there, a priest was there, and the family was all there. Before the nurse could even tell us that mom was dead, I knew. I felt her leave. I *felt* her spirit leave her body…and I knew she was gone. I told the nurse but she said, "wait a minute, she still has a heartbeat". And I said, "she's not going to take another breath. I felt her spirit leave." At the precise moment that her spirit left, I turned and asked the nurse to turn off the fan…I didn't know it was already off. The priest that was there in the room with us…he knew exactly what I had felt. He said to me, "that's not the fan". And yet, there was a wind. There was a physical wind in the room that I had believed was the fan. Later, the priest shared with me that, in Latin, wind and spirit come from the same word…and I *felt* that. I knew right then that I would *never* look at God in a superficial way again. I *knew* that that wind was her spirit…mom's spirit…exiting the room. But more specifically, I had *felt* the presence of God – whether it was His angels or God Himself – in that room. That wind was God's spirit coming to escort my mom to heaven.

Afterwards, I remember describing the experience as sheer ecstasy and sheer hell at the same time. The agony that I felt when mom died was way beyond anything I ever knew…and it surprised the bejeebies out of me because I didn't think that I really felt that strongly for her. The ecstasy that I felt was the realization that this 'spiritual *Being'* who I had had a very superficial relationship with was, indeed, very, very real…and I couldn't pretend anymore. This was real. That was a very spiritual experience to me…and it was definitely a turning point in my life. I knew that I could not have a brush with a God who was that personal and that close and that real and walk away unchanged. I walked away from that deathbed a changed person without any doubt. I had touched God…or God had touched me…and I *knew* it.

Even though I knew that God had placed his hand on my shoulder when I was praying that one time earlier, I believed that it had to do with the children, my niece and nephew, not with me. But when my mom died…I mean I never had my mom on a pedestal. She used to hit us with a bull whip, a teakettle cord, whatever was handy. She abused us. I did not see her as a holy or a sanctimonious woman. In fact, in my mind, she was a pretty crappy lady. I had no false illusions about what she was like, and yet, God had come into that hospital room to escort her home. I think, in hindsight, that made me realize that…even for her…and then I could personalize that and say, maybe for me…

After my mom's death, I was a changed person. I don't know whether other people would have seen the huge change right away because I had been faking the walk for quite a while…and I think I did a pretty good job of acting. But what that experience did for me was to make it very 'real'. I was no longer having to pretend…I dropped the mask. Now I was able to communicate on a deeper, more spiritual level. I developed a much closer relationship with my dad after that, too. The experience of feeling the presence of God in the wind on my back when my mother died, made me very aware of the existence of God, or a higher power – for me, it was God. In hindsight, I look at all the things that happened prior to that and I know He was there all the time, but that made it 'real'. I *felt* it, I just didn't *think* it anymore. I realized He was *there*. Then, through the year I spent in counseling, I realized that He was *here*, in my heart…that my spirit was connected to God in a way that I had never seen before and that, whether I felt worthy or not, I was still connected spiritually to God. It took a while for my spirit to be healed from the years of hurt and abuse and disappointments and blame. My mother and brother had abused me for years and so, all around, I was given messages about my worth…or *worthlessness*. And, once I had that healing in my spirit, I had the freedom to get in touch with my physical and emotional self. I think that the key part of the process was the spiritual awakening, for lack of a less used cliché. But it was almost like a, an *awakening* of my spirit…recognizing that I was broken spiritually, my spirit was broken. When my mother and my brother abused me, it was my spirit that was wounded. I became very broken and believed that I was 'nothing'.

Another significant turning point for me occurred during counseling because it *awoke* in me an *understanding* of myself …it was even more than a spiritual awakening. It was like a spiritual *introduction*…like I was being introduced to *me*. It was like a voice in my head saying, "Hannah, I want you to see who you are…I want you to meet Hannah and I want you to know and see who Hannah was created to be." I began to recognize that I was more than the sum of the events that had happened to me…that's not who I was …and I began to change. I became aware that there is something, someone, at work in the universe, beyond the 'here and now', and that my life is more than what happens in this world. There is a *purpose* for my being…beyond this physical plane. When dad died…I had my dad on a pedestal at the time and it was a very difficult thing to go through. I questioned why dad died when he did…and how he did. Dad died in an automobile accident when he was in the prime of his life. He was healthier at that time than he had been in ten years – he was on top of the world and was planning to retire and just enjoy life – and then he was taken. I remember laying in my bed a night or two after he had died, and I got really angry with God. I said, "why now?…just when I finally have this wonderful relationship with dad, why now?" And I clearly heard a voice say to me, "because five years ago it was too soon". Then I realized that God had given us those last five years as a gift…and that this was the time.

I had a dream, just after Dad died, and…I fully believe our dreams are a way for our spirits to connect with ourselves and God…and He can give us messages in our dreams. I dreamed that we were at dad's funeral in this little church we had gone to when we were growing up. The church building was in this town where we had an ice festival every year and, as we were coming out of the funeral, dad's spirit rose up out of the coffin and he began talking with us kids, his daughters. He said: "It's OK, nobody else can see me, you know," and he was just standing there telling us everything was all right. We walked with him to where the ice sculptures were and he began to walk up a set of stairs on one sculpture. I started to follow him and he turned around and said: "no you can't come. It's not your time yet…it's not time for you". Then the stairs began to melt from the bottom up. I woke from that dream with such an incredible peace, knowing absolutely that there *is* life after death…and I had an amazing peace about his death after that…that was my time to say good-bye to him. I realized that there was a purpose in God's plan and a time for everything, beyond this physical realm…that it was already ordained.

It wasn't until after dad died that I actually had the freedom to really start to deal with the sexual abuse. At the time, I was interested in having my stomach stapled to deal with my weight. My doctor suggested that it might be a good idea to do a psychological assessment to see if there were emotional reasons why I was struggling with the weight. Instead of a call from the woman who dealt with eating disorders, I received a call from a counselor who dealt mostly with women who had been sexually assaulted. I quickly told her I didn't need counseling for that at all, since I believed that I had 'given it to God'…I really didn't know what it meant, but I believed I had done that. And in my own naïve way, I had decided I was 'fixed'. I realized that it *had* affected me…but I thought I had dealt with it. When I had first mentioned the abuse, back in 1990, I had a counselor tell me to let God heal it…and that was a real cheap answer for me because, when it didn't work, I felt like a personal failure. I thought, either I wasn't a very good prayer or I was just innately bad and couldn't do this. However, the counselor I saw in 1996 was wonderful and I ended up seeing her for almost a year. She brought to my attention the need for me to connect with my spirit…the need to connect with my body and with my spirit. She talked one time about 'living in my head and not in my body' and I remember thinking that she was totally out to lunch. But she helped me to see that I *was* living in my head. I had totally disassociated myself from my body…I had just *disconnected.* I had started disassociating as a kid during the abusive incidents. I felt that I would die if I stayed in that space, so …I just disconnected from my body in order to survive. During one group session, she brought in a tape of some drum music and asked me to listen and *feel* the music and let my body 'connect' with the rhythm. At that point, I realized how much I had stifled my body. I realized that I did not experience the *sensations* the body normally provides to the mind – I was disconnected from sensation…from myself.

Another time, we talked about boundaries and…I think that empowered me to say, you know…if I want to do something, I'm going to do it…and I decided I wanted to go swimming. I discovered that I loved the feeling of the water on my body, moving over my skin, and I just experienced the sensations. I loved being in the water…it was relaxing…absolute utopia to me. That was the first time I can recall being aware of any physical sensations. After that, I found I could also *experience* music and, all of a sudden, I came to an awareness that my body is part of *me*. I began to reconnect with my body and discovered that I loved the physicality and sensation of swimming. For me, getting in touch with the physical side of me was a process that involved getting in touch with the spiritual side of me. My spirit had to be healed from years of hurt and abuse and disappointment and blame. Finally, I knew I needed to go to God for healing. Once I knew the areas that were 'damaged' in my life and needed to be repaired, I was able to go to God and allow Him to do the work in me that needed doing.

Because of my faith and spiritual growth, I think I have been able to forgive my brother for abusing me. I don't forgive the *act* of abuse, but I have forgiven the person. It's sort of a matter of separating *forgiveness* from forgetting. I don't forget because it's helpful not to forget where I've come from. As much as there was damage caused to me because of my brother's acts, they also shaped who I am, and the good in me. I'm a more sensitive person and I'm more able to have empathy and compassion for others who are suffering because I've been through difficulties. I'm not consumed with anger towards him and, the best revenge, for lack of a better word, is to succeed…to move beyond those events…to demonstrate that he did not destroy me.

I've grown a lot over the last few years and I've decided to go back to school this coming fall. I've wanted to do it for a long time but I've never had the courage or the belief in myself that I *could* do it. I definitely believe in myself now and I believe I *can* do it. I want to find out what I was designed to do and I believe that is going to come to fruition through education. I'm still learning about myself…it's an ongoing process, but I *have* learned to enjoy and appreciate life…I have a joy in my life and a sense of being alive that was missing before, yet I'm not really concerned about death either because, as far as my spirit goes, I know I am going on to a better place. When I leave this earth, I know it is only a physical death – my spirit will continue on to a new realm that is totally beyond anything I could imagine. There is a real excitement in knowing I have family waiting. I know where I'm going will be wonderful. And, so I don't fear death.

Last fall, I had a physical experience that I know was spiritual in nature in that I was healed of a health problem overnight. I had seen my doctor and he had told me I would need surgery to have a cyst removed. I was in so much pain that night and I lay on my bed and just prayed, and I said, "Everything that is a part of me, every little bit of my being, I turn over to you Lord" and I just focused on God's healing. And, as I lay there, the cyst began to drain and I felt instant relief. I went to see my doctor right away the next day …his reaction was very peculiar –he said he had no explanation. So, I know God's hand was in that. Sometimes, by trying to apply scientific and intellectual logic to experience, I know I diminish the power of the spirit. Although I can't understand it… I know it exists. It's the same power, the same spirit, within me that moves me from being a victim of childhood abuse, of date rape, and of an abusive parent. It is my spirit that moves me from that place of victim to a place of survivor…and maybe even beyond survivor to thriver, if that's even a word. It is *spirit* that allows me to rise above these circumstances and to recognize that my spirit…and the spiritual realm…is bigger than all of this…and it's eternal.

A Butterfly in the Rough: Lynn's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I first heard about Lynn from a close business friend who spoke of her with an obvious sense of awe and great respect. He agreed to approach her about my study and within a day or two I found a message from her on my answering machine. Lynn sounded cheerful and eager to enroll in the study so we agreed to meet the following day. I had been told she had an interesting and somewhat unsavoury background and was warned that she might be a little 'rough around the edges'...she would say what was on her mind and would 'call a spade a spade'. I was intrigued by the description I had been provided and was anxious to meet this woman who had made such a lasting impression on this individual.

Journal Entry

I took an immediate liking to Lynn and could certainly understand how she would leave an impression on all who met her. Lynn is a pleasant, 32 year old woman with an infectious laugh and a passion for tattoos, tropical fish, and guinea pigs. She was friendly, spontaneous, and eager to share her story. Lynn has a multitude of colourful tattoos that she shows off with pride, the most recent of which is a portrait of her two children. She has an impressive looking tiger staring down from one shoulder and was casually attired in shorts and a tee-shirt. Her auburn hair gleamed in the sunlight streaming in through her kitchen window and her children were playing happily in the backyard, yet constantly under her watchful eye.

Lynn is tall, fit, and filled with an apparent zest for living. She describes herself as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, a recovering alcohol and drug abuser, and a former hooker. Her home was small, but very clean, neat, and well-organized. Despite the somewhat cramped living area, there was a sense of order, with only small corners of chaos. I listened in awe to Lynn's story, astounded by what she had overcome...her story was riveting and very compelling. She was open, honest, and very straightforward about her background and former lifestyle. Lynn responded to all my questions directly, frankly, and with dignity, yet the lingering emotional scars were visible too. Lynn has had a hard life, one fraught with danger and difficulty and yet, against all odds, she has demonstrated remarkable resiliency and triumphed over adversity and suffering to emerge a wonderfully changed and magnificently transformed spiritual being.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born, an only child, in southern Ontario and my parents divorced when I was two. For many years I was told that my father left her but, actually, my mother was the one who left the marriage. She met a boyfriend when I was four and we moved to Manitoba for a few years. A lot of those years I don't really remember...I try *not* to remember, really. The things that I do remember involve a lot of abuse...sexual abuse. I remember going into the hospital to have my tonsils out when I was five, and they had to put a catheter in because I was very badly infected and had a lot of problems 'down there'. I told my mother at one point, but she did nothing...I think she asked her boyfriend about it, but he just beat us both up and that was the end of that.

Anyway, we lived in Manitoba from the time I was five until I was eight and a half. I don't remember much of that time…I don't have many memories from then…no good memories, anyway…I don't even remember school. I do remember that he was Catholic…he was raised a Catholic but he had very many problems and he was an alcoholic. He was very violent, but that's all I really remember of him. When I was nine, we moved to Vancouver and, after a few years of being in and out of the women's shelter there, she finally chose to leave him. Then we moved to Calgary…and that was when I found my real father. We moved there because that's where my uncle lived and he said he would help us.

When I was ten, I started shoplifting because I never *had* anything…you know, whenever we moved we just left everything behind and, I mean I slept on the floor, you know – I just really hated it, so I would steal. When I was about thirteen, I started taking my mom's marijuana…I would take her pot…and I was drinking a little by then, too. Not really anything heavy though, you know. I had gotten my first bottle of 'Baby Duck' wine when I was seven, actually, so I had been drinking for a while. I hadn't gotten drunk or anything, but I immediately, of course, fell in with the wrong group in school…different types of bad people. The first time I got drunk, I blacked out…and, that's the way I drink.

When I was fourteen, I discovered cocaine while I was partying with some people and I left home and pursued a life on the streets of Calgary. I lived on the streets from when I was fourteen until I was seventeen. I got really heavily addicted to drugs. I became a junkie and I did a lot of speed and demerol and cocaine. For a few years, the memories I have are kind of hazy…like, I don't remember much from then, but I do know that the Calgary police put me into detox when I was seventeen and a half. That's when I got in contact with my mom again and I moved back in with her and went back to school at the Alberta Vocational Center. My mom didn't care about my doing drugs…I mean, in her opinion, 'it was only marijuana'. It wasn't like I was shooting up…so it was no big deal. We were still living under my uncle at that time and we wanted to move, so I decided that I was going to go back on the streets and get some quick money, which I did, but then…I went right after the needles again. That last year was probably the worst for me. I was supporting myself by hooking and I had been drinking and smoking pot with my mom, but that was never really my favorite thing. I always felt really groggy from the pot and I didn't like drinking that much because every time I drank, I blacked out. I used to wake up in different cities, sometimes in really bad situations.

I always really felt like I was in control with the drugs – I used to do a lot of Tylenol and Ritalin – a lot of junkies use that, and I thought: "well, at least they're meant to go in the body". For the last nine months there, I lived in a part of Calgary near the National Hotel – down in one of the roughest areas. The people there were by far not the worst people I'd ever partied with – I had partied with a lot of really bad people. I kind of ended up partying with some of the Hell's Angels and some other really rough people. One time, I even witnessed a stabbing and the police knew I had witnessed it, yet it was against people I was associating with…so that last year was really rough and I was really using heavily. I was basically trying to die. I found it really tough, you know, being in AVC and having a student loan and having nothing to live on. I was used to having hundreds of dollars a day – of course, it all went to my habit. I mean, I couldn't go and be a whore and make all this money without doing drugs…they just go hand in hand. I was using enough that at times I could feel myself convulsing and 'going under'. I was still living with my mom… but I was shooting up and I was doing 'blow' and putting way more in than I would have liked before. I also crossed the line where I was quite selfish about it; I was unwilling to share anymore. I mean, my mom always smoked marijuana herself, so it was no real big thing to her, my doing drugs. She didn't like it when I did the needles but, the bottom line was, I would give her a couple of lines of coke and she'd leave me alone. We partied quite a bit together, and we'd go into bars together, and I always protected her…she was never the parent…I was the parent.

The last nine months I was using, when I was nineteen, I was just going down and down and I wanted to die. I had tried killing myself several times through my teenage years, but I had never succeeded, eh? I was just hoping I would overdose and that would be the end of it…but it just never worked. Then, I kind of got 'betrayed' by my drugs…I was a pretty good junkie, you know, I took care of my veins, but finally, I destroyed all of my veins and I had to start getting help to line in my neck because I had nothing left…I could no longer get high. So, I thought, "well, I've got to straighten out a bit…I've got to do something". Just before I tried to get into detox, I remember trying to inject air in my veins, but I couldn't find a vein. Its pretty bad when you want to kill yourself and you can't. I just didn't want to keep on living like this, I wanted to die, I was just so confused. So I went into detox again, but my full intention was to get cleaned up enough so that I could figure out a way to die painlessly…that was my main motive for going into detox. I figured I could kill myself properly when I got out.

When I was in detox, I can remember seeing people that I had partied with on the streets. There was one hooker there, she was all beat up from her boyfriend, and I heard her talking about treatment centers and about really getting cleaned up and I thought: "maybe this could work"…I really did. I thought: "maybe this could work". So I signed up for treatment in Ponoka and they told me it was going to take a month to get in because of the waiting list. I thought, "my God, I'm never going to make it", because for the last nine months I had been going out with a drug dealer and he lived with us…and there were always people coming and going. The people that I partied with always had drugs…but then, this counselor from Ponoka came out to see me and said they had a cancellation and I could go, but I would have to be on the bus that afternoon. So, one of the counselors at Renfrew said, "we'll take you home to get your stuff and we'll pick you up in an hour and take you to the Greyhound". So they dropped me off and…it was funny because I had my own phone line and I got three calls in the hour I was at home…people saying: "Where have you been? Let's go get high…or, let's go party" and stuff like that. And I said "no" to them, which was really quite amazing…that I did that.

Anyway, I went to Ponoka and I was in denial for a very long time that I'd ever been molested, but I think that…I don't know what it was that happened in Renfrew but I just felt like maybe this would work for me. So I went to Ponoka and we came to these AA meetings in Red

Deer, and that was actually where I met my husband. He was very good looking, you know, and that was just right where my thinking was at. I never generally lived with anyone…I mean I had a couple of boyfriends that moved in with me but…when I met him, for some reason, he said, "well, you can move in with me". So when I was done in Ponoka, I moved here with him…and I do believe that saved my life. If I had stayed in Calgary, I would not be sober today because my mom never quit drinking or using drugs and I would still have been in that situation. If I had gone back to Calgary, I probably wouldn't even be here today because, man, I ripped off a lot of people. When I got sober, I owed a lot of people money…and I'm not talking the local bank. I mean, if there was a bad group you've read about in the paper, I've probably partied with them. So, I came here and moved in with this guy I didn't really know, but…it *felt* right. He probably treated me the nicest that any person had ever done…and it was a real change…For some reason, I didn't mind it and, you know, we had both lived the same type of life and had the same type of things happen to us…it was just really unreal. I thank him…I know that today. We've been through a lot, you know, and he saved my life. It was sort of a clean break…and I'm very grateful for that. So, I felt very grateful for my life. He helped keep me strong for a while there and I just talked to him, but I quickly learned that was a bad thing. I had to go and find some other women to talk to and find my own way and not be so dependent on him. It was really nice…like, that we met each other. Then, after we were together for a while, I got pregnant. He wanted to get married and I said no…I wouldn't get married until afterwards. I wanted to make sure that's what he wanted because my mother had only gotten pregnant so my dad wouldn't get away. That was her whole reason for getting pregnant and there was no way I'd ever do that.

For me, getting pregnant was the most unreal thing ever. I can remember when I was thirteen and I started having menstrual cycles, I had such pain and I vomited all the time. I can recall the doctor saying that I was so scarred up I'd probably never be able to carry children. So when I got pregnant for this little thing out there, it was like "wow – I'm pregnant". I couldn't believe it…being pregnant…and then to actually carry him. The doctor figured I'd miscarry at around six months but I didn't. And then I have this kid and it was a perfect birth…a little boy. I just freaked, you know, and when I looked into his face, then I knew that there was a Creator that loved me. I knew that my life didn't have to suck, you know, seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I already had an inkling of that from my husband…we weren't married then but I just saw something better and I thought, "I am never going back!"

I know that my children have kept me alive, but I did spend the first five years that I was clean and sober…I was about a year and a half in when my son was born - I was 21 then. And the first five years I thought about killing myself…it's all I thought about. That thought never left during that period. I had straightened out when I was 20 and, there were still things that I used to do that were shameful…but no marijuana or alcohol or anything like that. I was so paranoid about taking drugs that I wouldn't even take Tylenol when I had the kids. I was about eight months clean and sober off of everything other than cigarettes when I got pregnant…and it was really neat because it was both his first and my first. So, when my son was about four months old, we got married. We figured we were both in it for the long run.

Before I got pregnant, I never knew how to take care of myself, so I went to a nutritionist and learned how to do a menu. I even…I actually even breast fed my son, too…which was a real change from what my mother had done. I was still nursing when I discovered I was pregnant with my daughter. Both my husband and I just wanted everything to be so different from what we had grown up with – we probably went to the other extreme. I had to learn how to look after myself right so I could look after the kids. I mean, when I was still living in that rough area of Calgary, out in the southwest there, I had gone back to the needles, right, and I knew hookers that were shooting up all the way through their pregnancies. I *partied* with women that would give their kids a few chocolate bars and then take them in to try and get ritalin prescriptions from their doctors. I can remember going to deliver drugs to people and seeing little kids running around playing…and there were syringes on the table and stuff like that. Well, I knew I wasn't going to do that…I didn't want that.

So, when I had my son…my water had broken and the doctor decided to induce me, and the nurse came in to start my IV. You have to remember, I still have the same attitude then, you know, and I remember looking at her and saying: "You get the hell away from me honey, you get someone up here that knows what they're doing… because you know, when you're a junkie they (the veins) stick up but then they either collapse or else they turn into overcooked macaroni, you know? Anyway, she tried a couple of times and then they got the anesthesiologist to do it. But I was so mad at her, you know…that's one thing I found really difficult…dealing with doctors and nurses. I told them, I said: "I'm the only person that would know these veins better than you".

Anyhow, when he was born…when I looked into my son's face, I knew there was a Creator…and that was a real surprise to me. I felt loved. You know, it's like…kids are like animals… they love. I mean, you can beat them and they'll still love you. We just bonded right away – he was 'my boy' and that was it. I even had his name picked out when I was about three months pregnant. They couldn't tell us the sex, but I knew. And I was just in shock because I had believed ever since I was a teenager that I'd never have kids. Having him really changed my life...just being pregnant, even. I started reading books and going to see this nutritionist, just trying to make sure that I would be able to look after myself and my kids, eh? Doing those things I would never have done before…talking to other mothers. I mean, you couldn't pay me to go to a doctor before him but now, my gosh, he coughed and I was right there. Even though we had friends who said they would babysit anytime…no! I didn't get a babysitter. I wouldn't give him a bottle. I found that I did things to take care of myself *for him*, you know. But I can remember looking at him and feeling some sadness too that, you know, jeez parents don't have to be like my mom…'cause up to that point, I thought my mother had done a pretty good job…until then. And thinking "no, no, no, no", you know. But I just had to *learn* to do all these things for this kid…that's when it *really* started for me…I started to really change.

There was this one other time that I had a really spiritual experience…it was when I had this blow up with my mom a year and a half ago. For a few years, I went for counseling with a group of women who were all survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and I remember dealing with my childhood and accepting what happened and thinking "OK – she was drunk…he was drunk… that's where they were at", you know. And I realized that *I* didn't do everything great either. A part of my accepting my disease of alcoholism was realizing that, even if I had been born into a perfect family, things might not really have been much different.

So, when this blow up happened, she had decided that, you know, now that she was in sobriety…had religion…had a boyfriend…wasn't using drugs any more… we should do what she wants. And she tried to get us to do what she wanted and, you know, that just sort of woke me up. I didn't stay clean and sober to be hurt by her…and I don't go where I'm not loved. In a way, that was the biggest change for me…it was the first time I realized that I didn't *need* her love and acceptance. For me, this was very spiritual in the way that God said: "Hey, you're *My* child and you don't have to take this…you are just fine the way you are." Before then, I always felt I needed her love. I would never be a whole human being if my mother didn't love me, right? It doesn't matter how bad your mother is, you know, there's still something inside of every child that says, "hey, my mother should love me…or I'm not a real human", you know? After that, I guess I crossed that line of, hey man, I'm no longer going to do whatever it takes to be accepted by other people. This is my life…I've got my husband. I've got my kids. And the bottom line is that when I leave this world, it's going to be just me. If people don't like me…well, whatever. Like balls to bones, that's it man. I figure, hey, this is where its at. If my own mother can't treat me good then I'm not going to worry about anybody else…about their acceptance or what they think. I just have to be me because I'm 'just fine like I am' to God. I mean, I can relate to other people and be concerned for them… I really can, because I've 'been there', and I can remember back to when I was using and what I was like. But the blow up with my mom just made me realize how much my husband and kids mean to me.

Whenever I feel kind of 'down', I go and pet my animals…or we go bike riding. When I got a bonus cheque from the store, I bought us all bikes, so we can go riding. When I feel the wind in my hair and the sun on my face, I really feel closer to God. And I love watching butterflies. I really love nature…that's where I am. I find my Creator there…and when I look at my animals…and my children…and I feel a part of it…like I'm no longer separate…sort of on the outside looking in. Now I feel a part of it and it gives me strength…and I'm gone. I feel that I get strength from my faith. That's been the biggest thing, you know. I spent the first ten years of being clean and sober thinking, "oh, I can't lose my temper. I'm not allowed to get mad." I realized that I didn't want to make any more amends or cause any more pain, and so I was really nice. I bit my lip…a lot. I actually think I've become a little feistier in the last couple of years because, I know who I am now and I figure I don't need to put up with anything because I belong to my Creator and He accepts me the way I am. Something else that has helped too, I think, was the realization that I was probably going to be living with him, my husband, for the rest of my life and not with the kids. That helped our relationship to get better too, because when the kids were little, if he'd get upset with them or raise his voice, I would just rip his head off…and this is their father! So, when I backed off of that, things got really better between us.

I told you that I tried to commit suicide quite a few times in my teens, and I thought about it constantly for the first five years that I was clean and sober. I think I had a really rough time when my son turned five because that was the age when my mom's boyfriend started to sexually abuse me. I had a really hard time dealing with that. I can remember, especially when my daughter turned five, looking at my kids and thinking, "how can anyone molest a child?" That's when it really hit me, you know, but I guess all the counseling and the therapy finally did pay off…like, it finally did…and I started feeling like a real person. And I can remember hearing, when I was in treatment in Ponoka, that it takes four years to clean your body and get the drugs out of your cells. It doesn't come overnight. I hallucinated for the first month, I mean, the paint really peeled, you know. I used drugs for a long time and so I wasn't going to be normal in one year…it took a while, the withdrawal. So it took about five years before I really started to feel like a real person. I just kept thinking, I have to do these things for my son because God gave me this kid, eh…and I probably learned…just about having patience, you know. Like, there are a lot of people that have patience in this world…I am not one of them. I have zippo patience…for myself or for anyone else. I mean I really had to fight and scrape for every ounce of patience that I have. So, when he was born, he could do anything. He was colicky, too and I'd be tired a lot, but I could just never see myself yelling at him or shaking him or getting mad, you know. That's where it really started for me. I learned how to have patience and I prayed for it. I'd fall to my knees, "Oh God, help me make it through this night." I really *believe* in my Creator, you know.

I really don't go in for that traditional type of religion…my stepfather was Catholic…and he was *soooo hippo-critical!* I remember we'd go into church Sunday morning after they had been partying all night…and they dragged me with them everywhere. I fell asleep in church one time and I can remember walking out that church door and having to bend over and hold a tree while he kicked me in the ass with his construction boots…and having the priest watch. So, no, I just don't buy it. Then, also, going back to school and learning that the Catholic church sold indulgences…like, they sold passages into heaven. No…for me, the Bible is somebody's idea of what they *think* happened 2000 years ago, and that's just their opinion…I don't think that. I mean, somebody shouts, "Oh, Jesus said this today", and they wrote it down. But they found these Dead Sea Scrolls, you know…but who knows who wrote them. For what I believe, I don't have to go to church to show the world that, "hey, I believe in God". When I don't beat up my kids, that says I believe in my Creator. When I treat people like human beings, that says…you know…there's more out there…we're all equal. Yeah. I really believe in my Creator.

I don't really miss the drugs but, you know, there's been times where…and it's not so much when I'm having a bad time either. When things are going bad in my life, I don't think about getting high. When things are going really good, that's when I think about it. Sometimes I can just be walking down the street and I get a smell of ether…I don't know where it comes from or why it has to be there but, it's like "wow" – I can almost taste it, like when I used to shoot up. So, there have been times when I've thought about it, but…my kids have kept me clean and sober at times…I've done it for them. But now, whenever I have bad days, you know, I have a couple of friends that I can talk to, or I listen to music – that's my thing, but I don't listen to heavy metal anymore. Now, I listen to dance music or…I even have some of the harmony takes, you know, like *'Cries of the Wolf'* and stuff like that – my husband just shakes his head. I do get a lot of strength from my pets though, too – I have a lot of pets. I have a lot of guinea pigs and I breed them for a friend of mine that owns a pet store. They're kind of my big thing, you know…and my bird. You can really get a lot of affection from animals. I think a person needs that, and I think kids need that too…it's important for them to have that kind of stuff…to have animals around and be exposed to all that…even though I get really tired of feeding them every day. My husband and I did go through a separation once, for a few months…probably because I figured he should be a certain way. But then, I realized that it's not up to him to take care of me…it's up to me…so now I'm a lot more independent. I know that I can look after myself and my kids. Now, we've been together for almost eleven years and I can't see us getting bored with each other.

Last year was kind of bad for us though in some ways. My husband does seasonal work and was out of work for, oh my gosh, a year. All our credit cards were bad and we had to file for bankruptcy. At the same time, we went through this whole thing with my mom. And then…we just decided to quit smoking about a year and a half ago. Actually, what I did was I started saving the money. I can never save in a bank account but, in the store where I work, we can buy the stocks. So, I put the money that we would put into smoking into these stocks and… "hey man, we're going to take a real vacation this summer…our first one in ten years". We're going to go to Vancouver so…that's what's keeping me going now. My husband has a job at the same store now too and so we're both saving up for stocks and, next year, we're going to move back to Ontario where his brother and sister live. My dad's there too…and both my grammas are still alive. And I have lots of cousins and aunts and uncles out there. We kind of want to be able to reconnect with them. They have kids the same ages as our kids, too, so we want them to be able to be together. We really don't have anything to keep us here.

I saw this counselor one time that runs a group for survivors of child sexual abuse. I went to a couple of her group sessions and, at the first one, I was pretty tight-lipped, but in the second one, whatever I could remember, we relived. That was really quite traumatic for me…but, you know, my husband has really helped me a lot, too. There's a certain level of trust that, I don't know, comes from being married to someone for a long time. You can't buy it…and, you can't bottle it…and, you can't get it any other way. When you're with someone and you know they're faithful to you and you're faithful to them, there is something that just comes from that in terms of trust. Like, I know that once we crossed five years, something changed. We'd always been pretty honest with each other but, somehow, the level of trust changed, and we became closer. We've been together for almost eleven years now and, I can't see breaking up…not at this point. It's nice not to be alone…and we're getting to know each other better… it doesn't feel like we're just taking it for granted, either…it's just the way it is… it's nice not to be alone. We've gotten a lot more used to each other and…the habits. It's nice, you know, because it takes so long to work through everything. And we're still in love after eleven years…which is alright. Yeah. "That's it", I said, "you wrecked my flat belly – you ain't going anywhere". It's been really nice, too, because we're both into tattoos, you know, we've got our thing.

The guy that does our tattoos is a friend of ours and our kids have gone to kindergarten together and I know his wife and that. I actually just had one done. I had my kids draw a picture and then I had it tattooed on. This other young guy that's tattooing in his studio thought I was crazy, but I didn't care – my husband and I are really into tattoos and we thought it was great. Anyway, that's our thing. I even have the babies' portraits here on my leg – I just had it done a while ago. I mean…they're very artistic. I don't have any skulls or Harley Davidson tattoos or anything like that. A lot of people ask about these ones on my arms and, you know, if I could go back I would not have them on my arms. I like them, but I wouldn't put them on my arms…now, I'm so tattooed that there'd be no removing the ones I have. It's just a part of me, you know…I just gotta be me. My daughter likes butterflies, so she picked all these butterflies out and I took her in with me and we put them on and coloured them. I guess, because of my life, one of the things that has happened is that I'm very protective of my kids. I don't believe it's paranoid, either…I believe it's responsible parenting. My kids don't get to run all over the neighborhood… it's just not allowed. You know, the road I've chosen, it isn't always the easiest…it gets really tiring. But God gave me these kids and I have to be there for *them*.

When my son was born, from that moment on, there was a recognition of God. I mean, it's one thing for me to be pregnant, but…I didn't really think it was going to happen until I saw him. You know, my gosh, there really *is* a child in there. That was my first sort of spiritual *awakening* when he was born. Right away, I remember feeling…just this love…and warmth. It was the most intense moment I've ever had – I could really *feel* God's love – I just knew it right away. That's why I think there are spiritual experiences every day, but…if a person isn't looking for them, they're going to be missed. So I have a pretty positive attitude about life now. I'm no longer scared of death, but I no longer want to die. I want to live to see my children grow up and I want to be a grandparent, you know. I want to do stuff… like I want to keep enjoying life with my kids. Every night, I still calmly rub my kids' backs and kiss them good night…because, if something was ever to happen to me, I don't want their last memory of me to be bad. You never know, eh? Life is short and you never know what can happen. I don't want them to think I was always yelling or that I never spent time with them. I don't want that for my kids.

Having my Creator in my life really changes how I think about myself and my life…and how I want to live my life. I feel that, you know, having Him around makes me feel better…and knowing that He's not in some building like a church. He's right here, in my heart, whenever I want Him…whenever I need Him…and that gives me a real sense of peace…knowing that He never leaves me…He's not going anywhere, you know. Now that I have my Creator in my life, when I look back at all those things, I realize that I wasn't a bad person trying to be good. I was a sick person trying to get better. I thought I was bad…I always felt bad so…you know. Now, its easier because I know that He loves me just the way I am.

A Gift of Love: Grace's Story

Researcher's Reflections

Grace came highly recommended to me as an exemplar of spiritual growth and triumph after trauma. I knew that she had shared with others her remarkable journey of suffering and transformation and was considered a survivor by many. She has been married three times, undergone several major surgeries in short succession, been divorced, widowed, separated, and reunited, and moved to a new country, all within a relatively short period of time. I was eager to hear her story.

Journal Entry

My first impression of Grace was of youthful vigor, friendliness, and genuine warmth. She is a petite woman with graying hair, clear, mischievous eyes, a healthy complexion, and a warm, and inviting smile. She was casually attired in a soft pastel jumper, yet there was an almost palpable energy and enthusiasm that radiated from beneath her calm, relaxed exterior. She certainly appeared younger than her stated age of 66 years. Soft mellifluous traces of a southern drawl betrayed her ancestry and oddly complemented her effusive praise of Canadian culture. Her home was beautifully appointed, tastefully decorated, and carefully arranged to promote a sense of simplicity and serenity. The soft classical background music further added to the atmosphere of calmness and peaceful quietude. Everything about Grace, and her home, conveyed a sense of harmony, tranquility, and peace. She was comfortable and at ease with herself and her surroundings. I marveled later that she had chosen a pseudonym that so closely mirrored her life, her environment, her attitude, her appearance, and her spiritual nature – it suited her perfectly.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born in the United States, I'm 66 years old, and this is my third marriage. I have had four pregnancies and have three living children, two daughters and one son. My first child was a full-term stillborn girl, and that was very traumatic. I had a 25-year marriage with my children's father before we divorced, an eight year marriage with my second husband who died of heart failure, and we're into our eleventh year together in this marriage. My youngest daughter was born late in life when I was 37…I had wanted several more children but had not conceived again after my first three pregnancies. At one point, I was told that I had developed endometriosis and would probably never conceive another child…if I did, I could expect to encounter serious difficulties. I was advised at that time to have a hysterectomy – I saw three different doctors and they all told me the same thing, but I thought, "No, someday I'm going to have that child"…and I held out until I finally conceived her. I knew I was meant to have another child and it was a high point in my life. I had hoped for a girl because the baby I lost was a girl, and the moment she was born…it was one of the peak moments in my life…total, absolute elation. I felt an overwhelming sense of love and joy and co-creation with God…pure ecstasy. But then, after she was born, the endometriosis got much worse; so I gave in…it was a complete hysterectomy, including my ovaries. Shortly after that, I found a lump on my breast that had to be removed, and that was very frightening. After that I found many more small lumps, so my doctor recommended that I have a subcutaneous mastectomy because several of them were pre-cancerous. Anyway, they took both my breasts and, a year later, I had reconstructive surgery. So, within five years, I had a new baby, a complete hysterectomy, a double subcutaneous mastectomy, and reconstructive breast surgery.

I was baptized a Roman Catholic – my mother was baptized on her wedding day so she could be married in the church to my father who was a Catholic, but mother was a Baptist. So, my early childhood was not one of a true 'good' Catholic family…but when I went to school, I was enrolled in Catholic school. I met and married my first husband while I was at college. He was the son of a very, very devout Catholic family. He was a very strong Catholic, and so, we never could use birth control or anything. Anyway, after our youngest daughter was born, the doctor told me that I was lucky to have had her…because I was 37…and should really be using birth control. I said that I couldn't do that without talking to my husband and my confessor. So, I went to confession and asked the priest for permission to take the pill. He said "absolutely not", so I went home and stewed about it and I thought, "I've got to raise this child…and I don't see anything wrong with birth control"…so I decided to start taking it. Then, when we would go to church, I felt like such a hypocrite… here I was going to church with the baby and our 'happy' family and yet, I was doing something the church was adamantly and vehemently opposed to. I wasn't following the rules, and I felt very guilty about that…I really did. I couldn't live like that and so I chose to leave the church and to keep taking the pill…only then did I stop feeling guilty.

When I started taking the pill and I quit going to church, it created some conflict between my husband and me. He was a good husband…as least, as good as he could be. He was at home in body, but never in mind or emotion…he was kind of like a 'boarding figure'. He did not participate in the family much. He didn't drink or carouse or smoke or...*anything*, but he was not part of the family. He would just 'check in' at Christmas and Easter, sort of...to see how we were all doing. We had very little conjugal participation even...and I do believe that he was very emotionally disabled. It was about the same time that I had the double mastectomy...and then the complete hysterectomy...and that was when he really backed out of the relationship...he never touched me again after the mastectomy. I didn't have any counseling, you know, but after they took my breasts and my reproductive organs, I felt I was just a shell...not a woman, just a shell. That's when he just *ptshhhht* out of there...emotionally '*left'* the marriage. That's when my life fell apart...it was one of the hardest times in my life. I was barely 'functioning' by then...it was like I was on autopilot. I had survived a stillbirth, an emotionally barren marriage, a strained relationship with my mother, a late pregnancy, various surgeries, and the relationship breakdown of our marriage. But, by then, I was pretty low and I didn't really have much sense of self worth.

Eventually, I began to look for another church...I felt kind of lost and empty...I needed and wanted something. I began to look at different religions and would go to different churches and try them out. My husband continued to go to the Catholic Church on occasion, but I did not go with him any longer. I was not happy there and, when I went, I really felt like a hypocrite. About that same time, I had begun taking art lessons and my teacher and I were becoming friends. I would tell her something and she'd say, "Be careful what you think. Thoughts are things." And I had no idea what she was talking about. Well, one day she gave me a booklet called 'Science of Mind' to read. We were pretty good friends by then, so I did take it and read it...and I began to develop some insight into, you know...what life was really about without the strict regimentation of Catholicism. That was when I got a wake up call...I began to wake up to, you know, my *soul*. I was like a starving person at a banquet... and I just ate and ate. The more I ate, the happier I got. After that, my life just went straight up...and it has been going up ever since.

During the period I was taking the art lessons, probably about 1973 to 1975, I began to get a hold of the idea of spirituality, and that was absolutely the turning point for me. After I got that pamphlet from my art teacher, I became metaphysically oriented…I began to read everything I could get my hands on – I was just like a starving person. I read a lot about metaphysics…it was quite interesting really because one day, as I was coming out of the supermarket, I happened to look across the street and there was a building that said '*Science of Mind Center*'. I realized that that's what I'd been reading about, so I went over and spoke to the pastor… that's interesting too because the pastor from that church is now my husband. Anyway, I told him that I had just come to see what the Center was all about and I put my name on the mailing list…but then I changed my mind because I was concerned that my husband might think this was a cult and I was worried about anything coming to the house. Well, one Sunday, I decided to go to church –and I began to feel welcome. And I began to feel liked, so I just tried to go every once in a while. One week, I asked my husband to go with me and he just made terrible fun of every part of it. That's when I realized this was coming to mean something to me. He would never go with me again, but I kept going and I began to feel *myself*…feel my spirit…feel '*me*'. And from somewhere, from deep within my 'self', I realized that: "They can take all of my organs and they can take my breasts, but they can't take the essence of 'me'…of who I am. I am feminine. I am woman." I decided that I wouldn't let it get me down. Somehow, someway, I knew that I was still *me*, and I think I did pretty well. I'm really proud of myself for handling it the way that I did.

Shortly after that, my husband informed me that we were moving to the mountains. He didn't like what he saw happening in me because I was standing up for myself. I wasn't being naughty or sassy, I was just beginning to feel my worth as a person…and that was a change for him. So, we moved…but my daughter and I were there alone most of the time because he would leave on Monday and not return home until Thursday. It was cold and lonely there, so I began taking classes by mail. I wrote a lot of letters 'home' because I had made a lot of friends at the church and I wanted to stay in touch with them. I just began to live for the information that I would get from the church and from my friends. I was just really…actively seeking to know God at that time…I truly was. I was searching…seeking answers…and I was becoming more creative.

My intuition began to sharpen and I began to honour it and listen to it. Everything about my life just became so much better. I became healthier. I became happier. And my husband and I just kept getting further and further apart. So, about a month before our 25th wedding anniversary, I told him I was not happy there and he said, "well fine – go"…and so I left and went back down south, back home.

Now I was faced with a new problem…I had never done more than just occasional work before. I was a homemaker all my life, and I just loved it. When I left my husband, I didn't take one cent from him…I went to work. I had collected plates and, you know, pretty things and, many years before, I had worked a little bit at an art gallery and I had helped out occasionally at a porcelain store another time. So, when I moved back to California, I was able to get a job in a fine gift collectible shop. I rented a small condominium with my daughter…one I could afford, because my husband didn't ever offer to give me a cent. I was single, then, for eighteen months and that's when I met my second husband. By then I was in second year Science of Mind classes and a friend introduced me to a man who owned an executive search firm. He knew I needed to make a little more money and he asked if I'd like to work for him. So, I did. While I was there, one of the other ladies introduced me to a friend of hers…and he became my second husband.

I can't really put my finger on a particular *instant* that I suddenly became aware of my spiritual self. It was just an unfolding of a *process*. It wasn't any 'big bang'… it was just a gradual unfolding of a process. When this first started, of course, I had no idea my marriage was falling apart. I knew that I wasn't fulfilled and I knew I wasn't happy, but I just never thought of ever changing. Without the church I probably would not even be here today. I really do believe that. When I was with my children's father, I was like an automaton…I got into being neither black nor white…I was just 'gray'. I would extend… he would reject. I would extend… he would reject. And I stopped giving, and then I stopped loving. After I got into the church, I began to realize that I had to love myself…that I was loveable…I couldn't really *expect* to get love from others until I had it myself…and I began to realize that I *did* have some good qualities.

My second husband was a Church of Christ person. He was an 'old' soul…so old…and so wise. I was busy discovering all this stuff and he knew it all along. He would go with me on occasion but he liked to play golf on Sundays and I didn't want to intrude on that. That was a very, very happy time in my life…it was a really, really sacred time…totally sacred. He was the most wonderful person, although he was an alcoholic. I was unaware of that at the time…I didn't know anything about alcoholism. He was not a binge drinker, but he was a maintenance drinker. He started in the morning with a bit of vodka in his orange juice, and that kind of just kept up all day, and after he got home. Then he had a heart attack and had to undergo quadruple bypass surgery. After that, he went to rehab and quit drinking. We saw that through together, but he was still smoking. We had two really good years and then his little old body just couldn't keep up… and he ended up having to be on dialysis. He often told me: "Grace, if I'd known you were coming along, I'd have taken better care of myself". He had two grown sons, and they had had a few rifts over the years, but between him and I, together, we healed the rifts. He used to say: "Grace, you're my angel. You've come to help me make my transition." It was a totally loving, giving relationship on both our parts. We didn't have much sex, but we were just really drawn together. We had eight wonderful years together and, by the time his death was approaching, I had already had about nine years of Religious Science and of 'knowing spirit'. No matter what I did for him he was always just so appreciative. He spent most of his last year in intensive care – he was there thirteen times,…but…just to be with him was my absolute total joy…it was a sacred time for me. I look back and I just have to say, "Thank You" for giving me that. That period was my greatest gift…outside of my children.

After my second husband and I got together, I did not have to work anymore…it was not necessary. He had always wanted a home and had not had very good luck in relationships. We had only gone together for, maybe, three weeks when he said: "You know, Grace, I think you're who I've been looking for all my life." He truly appreciated every meal, everything I did…it was just a beautiful time. The last time my husband was in the hospital, he was very, very ill and had fluid building up around his heart. We thought we knew how ill he was, but we didn't realize how close to the end it was. While he was in the hospital, my brother called to tell me mom had had a stroke and was not expected to live…she remained in a coma. After a few days, he asked me to come home to be with her for awhile, so I asked my husband's cardiologist what he thought, and he suggested that I go. He told me he thought my husband was getting better and that he was thinking about letting him go home when I got back. About the second day I was away, I called the hospital and talked to my husband…he said he was doing 'fine', but he asked if I could come home soon. I told him I'd come home the next day because I really couldn't do anything else for mom. I thought I would be bringing my husband home that day, but when I got home, his son picked me up at the airport and told me that his dad was not coming home and that we had to get to the hospital right away. He died that night. All that last day my husband kept asking: "Is her plane coming in yet?…how much longer?" And he…he *waited* for me to come…and I was there for about three hours when he died. We had always said "Together we can do it", but when I got there, he said: "You know 'sugy', I just don't think I can do it anymore." I said, "I know honey…it's okay." And I just sat and held him.

I think that that period of my life with my second husband…his grave illness and his transition…was absolutely within spirit. That was a very spiritual time. And when he died in my arms, that was an absolutely spiritual experience. Those hours immediately before his death…I felt almost as though I was out of my body and that I was in a different consciousness. The time seemed like it went on and on and on because he was labouring to breathe. And yet, it wasn't a very long time…although it seemed as though it was a long, long arduous time. I felt it when he left his body…and I just held him real tight and said, "I'm sorry…I am so sorry". I just felt so much sadness and sorrow…and yet, for some reason, I also felt: "Thank God he is not going to have to suffer any more". My physical self wanted to hold on to him…and my spiritual self rejoiced that he was gone. It was kind of a double-edged sword. At the very end, I was just holding him and his head kind of fell back and…that's when I felt his spirit leave his body…I felt kind of 'cold chills'…just kind of cool…cold, like when you get goosebumps. Just before he died, he was cognizant…he was conscious and so I was able to tell him it was all right to go and that I loved him. I thanked him for sharing his life with me and allowing me to share my life with him. We had a very beautiful closure.

When my second husband died, my daughter was just graduating from high school and so I was an empty-nester, plus I was a widow, and again, that was a really tough time for me. All I had was Ruby, my cat…so it was just the two of us. You know, that time right after his death is a little hazy to me…kind of a lost little period. Eventually I started getting used to being alone…it was not necessary that I go back to work, but I needed to do something, so I became a 'pink lady' at the hospital…I volunteered…and continued to go to church and take classes. During that same period of time, my present husband and his wife got a divorce…after 41 years. He called, and we began to see each other. I was a widow and only 55 years old…and he called and asked me to go to lunch, so that's how that started. We dated for about two years and then we got married in 1990. When we got together, he retired…which I hadn't expected him to do and we moved to California and got an RV. We had a lot of fun for five years…and we had known each other for a long time. He knew both of my husbands and I knew his wife. He knew my children…I knew his children. So, there weren't really many skeletons in the closet, you know. I had not expected to ever remarry, I just thought I'd live by myself for the rest of my life, but then we got together and we were really happy…it was a fun thing. We are just very well suited to each other, and this may be the most important marriage in my life because our marriage is a spiritual partnership. It's not all roses and flowers, but…he's healthy and he's well.

After we had been married for, I guess it was nine years, he wanted to go back to work, and discontent began to set in. He became quite 'grouchy' and he began to look at the ladies. He just kind of changed…and I wasn't happy about it at all. He became involved in the church again and then he decided he wanted to be single again…there are a lot of needy women in church and he's attractive…and he's sweet…and loving, and they would just 'glom on'. That was very hard for me, so finally, I told him that I loved him enough that if that's what he really wanted to just do it. So he left. I dearly loved him, but I didn't want him there just because he thought he ought to be there…I didn't want him there if he wasn't one hundred percent committed to being there. When he left I felt really alone. Sometimes, it seems that…every once in a while I get a really big 'hit'…but I just keep rising to the occasion and 'coming up' again. Loving him was in every fiber of my being…but he had to do what he had to do. And I felt no anger. It's strange…I didn't feel anger…I didn't feel resentment. And I to this day don't know why I didn't. But that time was a very, very spiritual time for me.

When he left, I thought he would get back into being single again…having girlfriends and swinging and doing all of that stuff. But I guess he decided that's not what he wanted and he began to call me again and, eventually, he asked me to come to Canada. He was already here in residence and the pastor of a church. When I got off the plane for the first time, he was standing there and I thought: "Oh my god, there's my darling. How can I *not* let him know how I feel?" But I masked it pretty good for a while, and everything was just very polite. He had just moved and his furniture had arrived the day before so I expected to have to help with all the unpacking but he had stayed up all night putting everything in place for when I arrived. He had made a place for me in the medicine chest and in the closet…he had a bouquet of flowers…and he had even given me a little envelope of Canadian money. He called it my 'Canadian pack', and he was as sweet as he could be…I had all I could do to just keep from devouring him. After a couple of days back together, we just began to know…and the upshot of it was, he put his wedding ring back on. I wondered how he was going to introduce me at his church…as his sister?…or a friend?…this lady from California? I never asked him, but when we went into church he said: "I would like to have you all meet my wife Grace". It was a big move after that to get resettled here in Canada…it was terrible and…oh god, getting used to everything. So, you can see, my life just keeps…it goes with this wind and swirls around a little. And every once in a while, God says, "OK honey, here comes the mixmaster", and he sets it on high …and I just have to hang on."

When I really want to feel a spiritual connection to God, I spend some quiet time by myself. I wake up in the morning and I do some spiritual reading, have my coffee, and put on some soft music. I get a lot of good out of reading a spiritual book and underlining and getting new thoughts and new, you know. I just take some time to get into myself. I try not to worry about anything and allow myself to move at my own pace and be partners with God. I do a lot of inner-talk with God…and I listen to my higher self. That may sound funny to some people, but I really listen to what's going on in my soul, and I really feel it…I just feel full of *grace*. When I'm really centered and I'm really in my God space, or I'm really in tune, I just feel so optimistic and up and happy and joyful and giving. I want to get out among people and share with others.

Before I really 'woke up' to my soul and spirit…before I had a real *connection* with God, I thought that God was someone 'out there' and that other people were 'doing' to me…that I was a victim. Now, I believe that God is *within* me, and my life is what I make it. Only I can change it…no one is *doing* anything to me. It is my own creation *with* God, and He knows what I need before I even know myself. So, when I pray, I just pray to be one with God…to *feel* God and to know that I am one with Him. I know that God knows what I need and will give me whatever I need. So, I am much more introspective now, more self-aware…and I know that no matter what happens to me, I'm going to be all right. My relationships with others are much more important, too, and I have finally healed my relationship with my older children. I'm not afraid of death anymore, either. After my father died I had so many questions…I didn't have a clue where he went. I was just devastated. He died very suddenly of a heart attack when he was 59 years old. My mother had never wanted children and we never had much of a relationship at all, but daddy was always there for me. So, when he died, I was totally devastated and I wanted to know where he had gone. There was just a black void to me, and I wondered: "Where did daddy go? What happened to his soul?" I wasn't even sure what a soul was…and I went out searching to find a book that could help me. After that, I went into a deep depression – I was 34 then. I think that was the beginning of my spiritual search…to find out what happened to my daddy's soul.

I believe very strongly in reincarnation…and in life between lives, too. I think we have continuous life…that the soul doesn't ever die…it just goes to a different dimension. I believe in angels, too…I saw one once, I truly did! I had gone to hear a writer at a bookstore…she was a medium…and she was doing a book review. I thought, "Gee…if she really is a medium…maybe my second husband will come and give me a message…or maybe my daddy will come". I felt real *anticipatory*, I was not *expecting* it, but I was certainly open. There was a woman, a very precious young lady, who sat down next to me and we began talking. She said that, two months earlier, she, and her husband were in Mexico with their infant son when he died, suddenly, from meningitis…and she was just *so* heartbroken. Anyway, then Rosemarie came and began to give messages to some of the people there. Then everyone would turn to look at that person, so you saw everybody in the room. Nobody ever did show up for me, though, and when the evening was over, the two of us were sitting talking and this, this…I can only say '*Being*' came around…he was right in front of me…and when he looked at me, I felt goosebumps run through my entire body. His eyes were the most beautiful… and he was translucent. A big, beautiful, translucent male with high, rustic cheekbones and blonde hair. He was kind of…tanned looking…I can't really even describe it. He looked at me and I felt something go through my body. He extended his hand and gave her a double-terminated crystal. He told her that, whenever she felt troubled, she should think of Him. She looked at me, and I looked at her, and He was gone…nowhere to be seen…an angel. She said: "Did you see?" and I said "yeah"! She still had the crystal in her hand. It was a very precious and sacred experience. I *didn't* have someone visit me but…I *did* have someone visit me. And I know he was a higher being of some sort. This really happened! He was kind of…translucent…or opaque…and he was…different…the face…you could see in his face the most peaceful, beautiful expression. I felt such a sense of peace…absolute, positive peace. I think that was probably the most spiritual experience I've had…viewing that *Being*. I felt so absolutely…I had goosebumps and I felt such a sense of peace…it was just unbelievable. I was stunned…I was absolutely stunned…I could hardly drive the car back home.

A Spirit of Strength: Carrie's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I looked forward to meeting with Carrie again, yet for the first time really, because I had met her briefly some 18-20 years ago. We met during a class I was taking, but she became ill and was forced to withdraw. Carrie subsequently underwent surgery and had a near death experience. She is a young widow and was referred to me by a friend who greatly admired her character and strength of spirit and faith as she had navigated some "horrendous and trying" situations. That point in time was to mark the beginning of a perilous illness and a remarkable spiritual journey.

Journal Entry

Carrie was neatly dressed and smiled readily, yet I sensed a slight reticence about her or, perhaps, a hint of fatigue. There was a deep sadness about her eyes that flickered unbidden from behind her cheerful façade and I wondered what form of pain or anguish was responsible for such an overt sign. Carrie nervously crumpled a tissue she held that would absorb the tears that flowed freely on several occasions as she recounted certain elements of her story. She assured me that, although some of her wounds remained near the surface of her emotions, she possesses great joy and peace in her life and wished to continue our discussion. Carrie's husband died suddenly and unexpectedly nearly two years ago from a massive heart attack. Since then, Carrie had also faced the demise of numerous other family members, which has added significantly to her already staggering burden of grief. Carrie's profile is one of strength and courage through a spiraling entropy, as well as a story of constantly changing and continuously emerging spiritual resilience.

Synoptic Narrative

I'm 54 years old, a former nurse, and a widow of two years with three grown children. I haven't been able to work for some time now because of a disabling work injury and that has been quite difficult. I don't think I would have been able to carry on if I didn't believe there was some point to all of this suffering, you know, that there was some purpose to life. That's all that keeps me going sometimes. I would have to say that the spiritual experiences that I have had really weren't 'new'…I mean, I've had a sense of spirituality all my life, but these experiences have really changed and strengthened my beliefs. I was raised in a very religious home and I actually went to nursing school in the United States because I wanted a school where nursing and health care were seen as a form of Christian outreach.

I think that I began questioning God's existence was when I was about thirteen years old. One of my uncles, a really, really nice man had died…he had committed suicide and, at the funeral, I was told he was in hell. I was very, very upset about that, you know, to think that 'one strike and you're out'…whatever else you had done in your life didn't really matter. My aunt, dad's sister, was very upset about this idea too…that somebody who had been so good was going to hell. I just couldn't believe that…and the irony of it was that the land the church and cemetery sat on was provided by my uncle. I just thought: "What's going on? Why is this happening?" I remember thinking, "my goodness, what more could this man have done?" So I had a lot of questions and I started to wonder about a God who was so little concerned about people.

One night…I've never been sure if I was dreaming or awake, my uncle appeared to me in his plaid work shirt and he said: "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Just try to live your life and continue to pray and to be faithful to God." It was very startling to me. I was kind of scared at first, you know, but then it made me question God and everything I had been taught to believe. I began to wonder about God… and I began to question who was given salvation…who God would allow to enter into heaven…and the route to get there. I thought a lot about that through my teens. All my life spirituality has been important to me, whether it is associated with a specific church or whether it is something that is individual and not affiliated with a church. I knew there had to be more to it than what I had been told because I couldn't believe that God had created all these people if He just wanted them to perish.

Anyway, back in 1981, I was teaching some spring nursing classes and, because we were quite short staffed, I was working some pretty long hours – two positions, really…seven days a week… and, sometime in early May, I started getting sick in the middle of the night and throwing up…it would last for two or three hours and then it would ease off a little, and I would get up in the morning and go to work. By August I was just getting really run down, so finally, I went to see the doctor. He admitted me to the hospital and did a bunch of tests…at first, they couldn't find anything wrong but, then they ran some gallbladder studies and decided that I had a tumour forming in the mucosa of the gallbladder. The doctor told me they had decided they needed to operate. I told the nurses on the unit that I was really worried that there were going to be problems with this surgery. I had had surgery before because both my pregnancies had resulted in Caesarean sections and I had been pretty confident that everything would be fine, then. I don't know why, but I was really concerned this time that there would be some problems. I was worried about my family because the twins were just babies then. Anyway, I had the surgery.

After the surgery was done, my surgeon left for an out-of-town conference. About four or five days post-op, I started to have difficulty breathing unless I was sitting up. The doctor who was covering for my surgeon wasn't really too concerned about it but, eventually, he decided to do some x-rays. On the following Saturday morning he came in and said the x-rays showed no pneumonia and he was going to discharge me. So I went home and, that evening, I noticed I had these little red spots all over me…by morning, they were much bigger. One of my friends and her mom stopped by to see me and her mom said, "Oh my god, something's really wrong." By the time they were ready to leave the spots had become these grape-like clusters hanging all over me. I called the emergency department but the doctor just said: "I'm sure it's just your nerves. It's probably just your imagination, but, if you really think you need to be seen, you can come up and see whoever is on call." Anyway, my sister, who is also a nurse, came over and she just hit the roof when she saw me – so she took me to the hospital immediately and, when we got there and saw the doctor things just started to fly around there. Apparently, the lab had called to say that my lab work was critical – my platelet count was under 10,000 and that they would have to hand count them – the final result was that my platelets were only 3800. The doctor wanted to put me in Intensive Care, but I refused – I told him that…whatever was going to happen, I was not going to be cut off from my friends and family. He agreed to admit me to the ward then, but I told him I had to go home and prepare my husband and kids…I was 'having a bird', you know. Anyway, he called my sister aside and told her to be really careful going home across the train tracks because, if we were in an accident, it was 'lights out' for me.

We got back safely, of course, and the internist came to see me…he was just livid. He said: "Why the hell did they discharge you? These x-rays show that you're full of pulmonary emboli." My platelets were so low by then that he decided to give me four units of platelets. He had been reluctant to do that because I was allergic to so many different things but I guess he felt he had no choice. He said that one of the nurses was going to have to stay with me and have an emergency drug tray in the room. I didn't really think much of the nurse though because she came in and started the platelets running, and then she left.

I was just sitting in the room, really concerned, and I looked over where the chairs were, you know, against the wall. All of a sudden my brother and my dad appeared and then I got really scared - they had died within just about six weeks of each other and…my dad and my brother were just standing there with a presence, like an angel, standing behind them. I could see them clearly, and I could see the wall right through them. I'd heard people say before that sometimes, when a person is dying, they see their loved ones who have gone on before them. I thought" "Oh my God. I've got babies at home. This can't happen…just absolutely cannot happen, now." I was really afraid, but then, they sat down on the chairs…and they sat like they always did when they were just visiting…with their legs crossed, like this. As soon as they did that, I knew that they were just there to watch over me. And it was the way they sat down that told me…they just sat on the corner of the chair with their legs crossed, that certain way they did, and it was really strange. But this presence, this angel that was behind them, was just so light, almost transparent. There was substance…but not substance. He wasn't incandescent…he was whiter…brighter…he was…translucent. You could sort of see through all three of them, but this presence was more translucent, whiter, and brighter…than my dad and my brother. They gave me so much assurance. What I remember most was, I wanted to talk to them, you know…would like to have had the nerve to question what was on the other side. But the fact I had a roommate next to me kind of squashed that idea. When they sat down, I just felt such a peace…a feeling of peace…and warmth. I felt this great calmness and peace come over me… and an assurance that things were going to be okay. I never worried after that. They stayed there with me until after all the units of platelets were finished. When they disappeared, I looked up and everything was finished and I knew that I was going to be fine.

The next morning, the lab tech came to draw some blood, and then, the internist came in to see me a while later. He said he didn't know what he was going to do with me because my platelets were still under 10,000 and they should have been up. I said I knew I was going to be all right and he said, "Well, the lab work doesn't show it", so I told him that when they took my blood in the morning, I hadn't bled as long…so…I knew it was working. He just looked at me…but then, he came back a few hours later and told me that the hematology department at the U of A said I was probably right because the platelets would go to the sites of hemorrhage rather than into circulation. It took a month in the hospital before my platelets reached a level where I could go home. But, I knew from that time on that God was concerned and that He had given me the strength to recover.

I haven't really told many people about that experience…I did share it once with a doctor at a palliative care meeting I attended, but I haven't told many people associated with health care because they would probably just think I was crazy. I did tell some of the nurses that I had been given assurance that things were going to be okay, though, and they didn't have any problem with that…but I didn't tell them the whole story. Even with people that I figured could accept it, I had some difficulty talking about this. My husband's brother was a priest, and I told him one time, too…he kind of looked at me funny and I asked him why it seemed so strange. I asked him why he prayed if he didn't expect God to do anything and he just smiled and said, "Well, you're right, it's just that you don't often hear of that". I realized then that there is no one route to God…you don't have to belong to a particular church to find God. I realize that He died for everybody and is there for everybody.

After I got out of the hospital, I went back to work for a while, and then I was injured. I had been working with a client in a residential area and had taken some clients to another building to see a doctor. The residence where I was working was having some repairs done and the workmen had placed some plywood out by the fence…on the other side of the walk, the shrubs had been clipped off and were very sharp. As we were walking by, some of the plywood must have been bumped and it came down on top of me and knocked the client's wheelchair over. I was trying to keep the chair from going all the way over because I was afraid my client could lose his eyesight if he fell into the shrubs. We were both calling for help, but nobody heard us right away, and I really injured my back trying to hold him and the chair from going completely over. After that, I developed diabetes and hypertension; I started to have problems with arthritis and my asthma really began to act up. Since then, I haven't been able to work and have been off on long-term disability…and that's quite stressful emotionally. I think, if you've always worked, a lot of your self-esteem comes from your job and its difficult to relinquish your independence.

After I got hurt, I was put on analgesics for pain, muscle relaxants for spasms, sleeping pills for insomnia from the muscle pain, and medication for hypertension. So, I was on lots of medication and seeing the doctor quite often. During that time, I started putting on weight, for no apparent reason, and I was getting very, very tired. I kept telling the doctor that this was not normal for me but he thought it was just from my injury and the medications. Finally, three years ago, my husband went in to see him and told him he had to do something because I could hardly get up to the bathroom I was so tired and in so much pain. He told him that he could hear me crying or whimpering in my sleep whenever I tried to move. I also had chronic diarrhea, ever since my gallbladder surgery, so he admitted me for a gastroscopy. When I 'came to' I heard the doctor tell the nurse to give me another ampoule of Narcan and, I was trying to think…but I couldn't stay awake. It turns out the sedative they gave me knocked me right out because my thyroid wasn't functioning…it took me over 24 hours to recover from the procedure.

After that, I never went looking for a job because I figured that God knew the needs of my family and He knew what needed to be looked after. I wasn't about to endanger that…and my family became even more of a priority. When we needed a new car, I prayed that, if we were to get that car, that I would get a job and be able to make arrangements for someone to look after the kids. That Friday morning, I got a call asking if I would be interested in teaching a spring and summer session for second year nurses…and it was enough to cover the cost of the car, the taxes, and the insurance. You know, I came to a point where…it's not that I was sitting back and not doing anything, but I needed to trust that God knows where He wants me to be. We all want to do things that bring glory and allow us to get 'stuff', but maybe the whole reason that we're here to begin with is to do something small…the greatest cathedrals began with small stones.

Just a little over two years ago, my brother-in-law, the priest, died suddenly. About a month later…I had gotten up early in the morning to get my husband off to work, and then I went back to bed and fell back asleep. All of a sudden, while I was half asleep, I felt someone take my hand. I rolled over and saw it was my brother-in-law and he said, "Our family will be reunited within two years". That's all he said, and then he was gone. It was only about a month or two later that my husband died. He and a neighbour and the twins had been out playing tennis when I heard my neighbour's wife yell at the kids "Get your mom, your dad's gone down". I grabbed the cordless phone as I ran out of the house and I called 911. One of my sons and I did CPR on my husband, but, as soon as I looked down, I *knew* he was gone. He had had some heart trouble in the past, but at that time, he was relatively healthy.

He had had a heart attack in the winter of 1986, *I believe*. He was white, pasty looking, sweaty, and complaining of chest pain…but he said he was okay and he got quite angry when I said I was going to call an ambulance. He had been coaching badminton at school about that time and had complained of his arm hurting, but he figured it was from the badminton. Then, a couple of months later, on Easter Monday, I found him sitting in the rocking chair in the front room just hanging on to his left arm, and very obviously in great pain. I told him I was sure it was his heart and that he had to go in to the hospital, but he was insistent that it was nothing. I guess it got worse though because later that day he went to the hospital. He had always been hypertensive and both his mother and brother had died of sudden cardiac arrest just at a very young age. Anyway, he was admitted to the ICU and spent a few days there before the internist sent him to Calgary for an angioplasty and possible bypass surgery. While I was waiting for him to return from the angioplasty, I was sitting in the ICU and… it's funny the things your mind remembers.

There was a view that looked out over the river…and the windows were so dirty. I was sitting thinking that the kids were only three and five years old and wondering how we were ever going to manage. Anyway, I picked up a blue Gideon's Bible and opened it up and this scripture just jumped right out at me. It said words to the effect of: "Don't worry, I will not leave you as orphans at this time." Then, I knew he would come through it just fine…and Mike, my brother-in-law, had warned me that morning when I was sleeping a month or so earlier…my husband died when he was just fifty-nine.

When my husband had been transferred to the Holy Cross for an angioplasty, I figured they must have gone ahead with the bypass surgery because I had waited for what seemed like an eternity, but they had taken him to his room and forgotten to let me know. However, they were able to open all four arteries at once with the angioplasty. The doctor told us he had been born with an extra branch off one artery that was still 25% patent…all the others were completely blocked. He said that shouldn't have saved him but, because he was so physically fit, he had developed some good collateral circulation. He was relatively healthy after that. The only thing was, I don't think they really followed him long enough, because it really helps you to stay with the program. My husband wasn't very good at that…he ate whatever he wanted to…like bacon and sausages. I refused to cook food like that for him so he would cook it himself. I'm sure he knew what it was doing to him. He stayed physically fit, he hadn't smoked since we got married, and he very seldom drank, but he did eat what he wanted.

Since all this has happened, relationships have become much more important to me, too. I have always believed that no one person is more important than another…everybody forms an integral part of a community, but…since these experiences, I've changed a lot…I've become more accepting of other people. I just refuse to hold anger against another person, you know. If someone slights me, I don't make them apologize for hurting me…because inadvertently, I might have said something to hurt someone at times, too. I'm only responsible for what I do and if I push others away, that lowers me. I don't think I set myself as much of an of example to other people if I let little things offend me and hold me back from building relationships. I think that allows me to have deeper relationships with other people, too. I care more about other people now…to me, caring is an *attitude*…it's an attitude of care and I really try to care about those around me. I try to care about everyone…and I try to be willing to help anyone who needs help. I used to be a lot more ambitious for myself and for my kids, too, you know… but now I'm not so concerned about that. I want them to find their own route in life, as long as it's something that's worthwhile because God can use everybody. It's not what you *do* that counts so much as who you are as a person.

All of the experiences I've had have really strengthened and broadened my faith…it was always there, to some degree, but now it's a lot stronger. I think that having that warning from my brother-in-law subconsciously conditioned me to the possibility of my husband dying, but it was still a shock. After I opened the Bible to that passage when my husband had the angioplasty, I was assured that he was not going to die then, but I realized that he wouldn't be around for an indefinite time either. At the time, I knew we had been given a reprieve, but I also knew it was not for an indefinite term…however, the kids would not be left as orphans at that time, and that was my deep concern…so we had another twelve good years after that.

The night after my husband died, the night before his funeral, my family and I had just talked a little bit about him and about all the things that were happening and, as I was getting ready for bed, I thought, "Oh God…what are we going to do? How am I going to manage?" We had put everything we had…and more…into this place because we wanted to start up a Saskatoon orchard. I didn't know what I was going to do…and then, I *heard* my husband reciting the lyrics of this song. It was a song called *'His Eyes on a Sparrow'* and he was just saying the words to me, except…the only difference was he said *my* heart and spirit's *free*. It was very comforting… my spirit's *free*…a sense of freedom…from his heart. So, he must have known that, too.

Over the past two years, there have been many deaths within the family, mostly within my husband's family. My brother-in-law died, my brother-in-law's mother, an uncle by marriage, my sister-in-law's mom, my cousin and her mother, who both died from ovarian cancer after being diagnosed within four days of each other, and my cousin's wife. So there has been a lot of death and a lot of stress and a lot of grief over the last few years…and it happened just as my brother-in-law, the priest, had told me it would after he had died. So I'm no longer particularly afraid of death myself, but I'm not rushing towards it, either. I mean, I definitely believe in life after death and I know where I'm going when I die. My husband died a little over two years ago and, although I'm still going through a lot of grief, I do feel that I'm emotionally whole. I don't know if I'll ever 'get over it' completely, but I do feel spiritually 'whole'…one of my friends who is a mental health nurse told me that I'm going through 'delayed grieving'. I did very well for the first year or so and this year has been more difficult. At first, I couldn't cope with everything…I was too numb…and there were so many things that had to be looked after. But things are getting looked after now…and things are finally getting better. I'm happier and I know I can go on now. I actually think I'm doing quite well spiritually and I've begun to find a sense of peace about it all. I trust God is looking after me and I know things are going to be all right.

When I want to be alone with God and to really nurture my spirit, I go for a walk in the park, or down to the ponds, or over towards the ranch. Even when I was growing up…we lived on a farm and we had a creek running through the property. There was a steep bank down a hill where there was a lot of spruce and aspen. When things bothered me, I used to go and lie down and watch the clouds…listen to the breeze and the sound of the water. I still like to do those things – they've always been very recharging to me. Now we live by a lake and there are lots of trees and wildlife around…it's a very relaxing place to be. It is very quieting there…it just quiets your spirit…it's very peaceful. Sometimes I'll listen to music…I've always loved music. It doesn't really matter what kind…I'm pretty eclectic…it just depends on the mood I'm in, but I find that it really nurtures my spirit to do that. I think you can *be* with God and worship God the best wherever you are comfortable…wherever you can feel closer to God…not everyone has to find God the same way.

A Pearl of Great Price: Marjorie's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I had heard about Marjorie from a friend who called her about my study. Marjorie would soon be visiting family here, so she simply left me a message providing her consent and leaving a prospective date and time for our meeting. Marjorie was taking time from her vacation to meet with me and I was conscious that her time was limited and precious. I knew Marjorie had had a very difficult childhood, had lived a homosexual lifestyle for the majority of her adult life, and had attempted to commit suicide – all prior to having experienced a profound and life-altering spiritual transformation. Following her encounter, Marjorie chose to abandon homosexuality and now counsels others who also desire to abandon the gay lifestyle and embrace heterosexuality. I realized that this was Marjorie's story and it's telling would require fidelity to her experience, although it might be difficult for some to hear.

Journal Entry

Marjorie was tall, slim, and physically fit; she hardly looked her stated age of 68 years. Her eyes sparkled with life and perhaps, even a hint of mischief; her energy level was palpable, and I quickly warmed to her. Marjorie was forthright, focused, candid, and thoughtful. Her story was compelling and we were deeply immersed in conversation when I was abruptly jarred into the present by the 'click' of the tape ending. I scrambled quickly for a second tape, apologized for the interruption, and frantically slammed another tape into the machine. The afternoon had disappeared as in an instant and the daylight was dwindling. I was saddened to realize that we had come to the end of our time together. Marjorie had entered my life a stranger through a 'chance' encounter, yet my life was changed, and forever enriched, by her brief appearance in it. I looked forward to the time I would spend with Marjorie, learning to know her through her story. I continue to marvel at her spiritual journey and wonder at how many lives she has touched by her presence. Marjorie truly is a 'pearl of great price'.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born in Nova Scotia into a family of three girls. My father was not married to my mother – he had been married before but his wife had left him and taken their two sons with her. I know he mourned the loss of his sons and, after he had three girls with my mother, she became pregnant with me. My mother said he had told her that if 'it' was another girl, she shouldn't bother coming home. My father had desperately wanted another son. I think he wanted me to *become* his son and so he always treated me like a boy; yet he never really embraced me as his son. Sometimes he'd take me hunting but I would just be the dog to him and have to 'fetch' the birds; he actually *called* me his 'retriever'. I don't recall him *ever* calling me by name, I was just this 'thing' that was there. I never really had any sort of *personal* relationship with him. So my identity, when I was with my father, was that of a boy…or a 'dog'.

My mother made it clear that she never really wanted me either. Before she got hooked up with my father, she had had a lesbian relationship with a woman named Marjorie, and so it was from her that I received my name. I'm sure there was a subliminal message in that, too, that my mind somehow picked up on, and that also became part of my identity. When I was about six, I remember once seeing my mother standing over my father with a knife and having to go and take the knife out of her hand. My parents fought a lot. Sometime between then and when I was ten or twelve, my father left my mother. As I said, my mother never really wanted me– in fact, she even gave me away a few times, so I used to sleep with my clothes on 'just in case'. One night, I remember that my mother had a date with this man who she really didn't know, and she had told me to get to bed. I did go, but I kept my clothes on, and when she came upstairs to get her coat, I said: "I'm going with you" and ran down the stairs and jumped in the back seat of the car. By then, my mother and this guy were arguing, so he said, "Aw, just let her come". Later on, they put me in the front seat and they were in the back seat and, as the date proceeded, he began to rape her. He yelled at me to lie down in the front seat, "or else", and I knew that that must have meant something that would be worse, so I laid down. It was awful. My mother was screaming, and I was *so* afraid. I was terrified and I couldn't do anything but just stay down and listen to her screaming – I couldn't respond…I couldn't *do* anything. A year or so later, she took her own life.

I recall quite vividly, a time, when Marjorie came to see my mother. I was so excited about meeting this girl who I was named after - I thought this was a really big thing. When the doorbell rang, I was downstairs playing and I thought "That must be her", so I started up the stairs. When I got half way up, I could see them in the dining room and I heard Marjorie say to my mother, "Can you come away with me now?" And my mother said, "No" – and as she said this, she put her hand out and I could see her finger pointing towards me on the stairs. She said, "No, I've got this 'thing' to look after". I was so hurt by that. I went back downstairs and crawled underneath the stairs. I just sat there and cried and cried and cried. So I never had any security whatsoever…from anyone. I was just 'the thing'.

An interesting note about my father…he came from a very wealthy family of fourteen in England and, as I was told, he got into an argument with his parents over an inheritance he felt was due him right after the war. When his parents refused to give it to him, he became very angry and upset, left home, and changed his family name. So, again, I had no sense of family identity, of our heritage or name even. I had no historical or family identity, no identity from my father, who called me his retriever, and no identity from my mother, who called me ‘this thing’, and who often ‘gave me away’. So I grew up not having any sense of belonging anywhere, knowing that I was unwanted, with no role models, and being given mixed messages about my sexual identity. So I certainly felt unwanted as far back as I can remember.

Even when I was in school, I never really knew who I was. I stuttered so badly that the teacher would make me stand in the corner with a dunce cap on my head –and she would tell me not to turn around until I could read a particular passage from the bible without stuttering. Now, I didn’t stutter in my mind, so I thought, “if I’m not stuttering in my mind, why, *why* do I stutter when I speak?” But of course, when I turned around, I stuttered just as badly, if not more so, when I tried to read it. So that just became another offence for which to be punished and isolated. And my heart, and my spirit were wounded in ways that my mind could never understand. From the times in the corner, though, I became quite familiar with scripture, even though I really didn’t know anything about God or who He was, or could even name Him in that way. Other than on those occasions, the only times I ever heard about God were from girls I was with later on.

One time, just before my mother died, we were living on a farm near Toronto. We had been in Toronto and were coming home very late. It was pouring rain when we got off the bus and there was this big ditch, maybe 20 feet deep, along the side of the road. I slipped and began sliding into the ditch and I was yelling, “Help me get out of here”. I just kept on repeating it, frantically – over and over. And as I was sliding, I remember the headlights of a car lighting up the road, and I could see my mother getting smaller and smaller. She was walking away from me…and she just kept on walking, and I could see her silhouette getting smaller and smaller. I thought, "Well, she's leaving me again, so how am I going to get out of here?" Anyway, I found a place where there were some rocks and it wasn't quite so slippery and I was able to climb out.

After my mother committed suicide, I went to live with my father for a few months, but he didn't want me, so, finally, I just ran away. I was only fourteen at the time and I went back to Toronto where my grandmother was living because I thought maybe she'd take me in. So I went to her house and I knocked and when she opened the door, I said, "Its me – its Marjorie". She just looked at me and said: "Its your fault your mother's dead. I never want to see you again. There's no place for you here, so just move on"…and she shut the door. I just stood there and I thought, "Well…I have five dollars in my pocket. I have no place to go, I don't know anybody here. What am I going to do now?" So I started walking and looking for a hospital because I had worked in a hospital for a few months after school and I thought I might be able to get a job there.

When I got to the hospital, I said to this man I saw, "I need a job. I'll do anything. I'll water flowers. I'll empty bedpans. I don't have any money and I'm new in town." Just then I heard a voice behind me say, "I'm Mrs. Jones, the superintendent of nurses. Can I help you?" I told her I needed a job. She was kind of laughing, you know, but she said, "I just happen to need somebody so, we'll give you a try." I told her I didn't have any money or any place to stay and, she went and got her purse and gave me a twenty dollar bill. And this was 1948! She said: "Go and get yourself a room…and you be back here tomorrow morning at six-thirty. You'll work from six-thirty in the morning 'til six-thirty at night - you'll get three meals, so let this be for your room." I thought, "She must be an angel". That was my first job - I made sixty dollars a month.

Then, when I was about eighteen, I began a series of lesbian relationships, the last of which ended in an attempted suicide. I lived a homosexual lifestyle for approximately 40 years; in fact, I led a *dual* lifestyle for that period because I lived both male and female counterparts, depending on my current job and life situation. Some jobs, such as when I taught driving and ran courier, I dressed as a man and used the name 'Roger'. Most people never knew. But then, when I went to work with the Ontario government, I had to have a physical of course, so then, I was a woman and had to declare my identity as 'Marjorie'. I lived a double life at that time. Whenever I was on duty, I was 'Marjorie', and whenever I was off, I was 'Roger'. I had that double identity all through my life after that. I had been considering a sex change and was taking male hormones for some time, so it was easy to change my voice. Since my father brought me up 'male' while he was with us, I had no real concept of feminine – so it was very easy to *be* male. But then, I look at the biological and I think, "but I'm not that"...so, I became very confused. I'm not stupid...I knew the difference biologically, but I certainly did not psychologically. So, I thought, I'll get a sex change to correct that because somebody messed up and got something wrong – God – whomever...but I couldn't afford that. So...you do the best you can. I worked for the Ontario government for almost 20 years until they discovered I was homosexual – then, I was fired.

Anyway, in 1981, my partner and I decided to leave Toronto and move out west. So we went to Vancouver where I bought a little auto detail shop and she bought a restaurant and we were going to live happily ever after in a sweet little nest in the west. She was back in Toronto preparing for the move and I was in Vancouver waiting for her to come. Three weeks into the move, I received a phone call from her saying that our relationship was over. I was in my motor home, cleaning it, when she called – we had been partners for eight years at that time. I was so distraught that I just said, "The hell with life. It's not worth living." I closed the garage door of my detail shop, turned on the engine, stuffed some cloths in the exhaust pipe, and climbed into the motor home to die. And I just said the same words over again: "To hell with life. It's not worth living. To hell with life – it's over." The split second I finished repeating those words, I heard a very loud 'banging' in my mind. A loud pounding – louder than my heart, and *it* was pounding. It was so real that I thought – I was sure there was somebody outside. And I *heard* the words: "What the hell are you trying to do – kill yourself?" Believe me, there was nobody around. It was a Saturday afternoon and everybody had gone home. So I opened the door and got out to look around and there was nobody there. Then, I just looked up toward the sky and I said: "Oh, God...are you for real?" I *know* I heard those words, "What the hell are you trying to do – kill yourself?" My first thought was, "Jeez, I can't even do *this* right". And I was surprised, too, because I think God really said that to me…since that was the only language I'd understand. He was very outspoken…He knew I would respond to that…that was my lingo. I connected with that…and it stopped me. I got back in my motor home and drove home.

On the way home, I stopped and bought a newspaper to look for a partner to drown my sorrows with, but I happened to turn to the church page instead of the personal column. There was an ad for one of the churches in Victoria and it said: "Find reality in Christ" and I thought, "Well, I don't know about Christ, but I would like some reality". And that's all I thought of it then. I just closed the newspaper, got some liquor, and went home to drown my sorrows. But that whole experience certainly brought about a realization that there was something, *someone* higher than myself, *greater* than myself, and I began to wonder about that.

I didn't respond to God immediately…it was about three weeks later that I wandered into a church. The sermon that day was on the woman who was so low that all she could do was reach up and touch the hem of Jesus' garment and I related very much to that point. After the sermon, there was an invitation and I decided to go forward. I was pretty nervous because I had gone to a church once before when I heard on the radio that God could heal anything. I had thought, "Jeez, maybe I'm suffering from this thing I had heard about called 'gender identity' and my sexuality is confused – maybe He can heal me from that". So I went to the service and, afterwards, I told the minister a bit of my story. I said I was living homosexually and I wanted out of that, or at least to understand it, because that was my only identity. So we began to pray and about a minute into the prayer, he stopped. I opened my eyes and saw that his hand was pointing toward the door and he said: "The spirit of homosexuality is too powerful - I cannot pray against it. Please leave the church." I left and I hadn't gone back, so the only time I had tried church, I had been rejected.

Anyway, back to that Sunday and the sermon about the woman…all she did was touch the hem of Jesus' garment. So when they gave an invitation to anyone who would like to touch the hem of Jesus' garment, I thought: "If I could just get a hold of the hem – *she* was made *whole*.

Maybe *I* could be made whole". The moment I went forward I knew my spirit had come alive – it had been dead before, but now it was alive. I was still thinking about my last experience at the other church when the minister asked me to leave. This time, I didn't bring my homosexuality… I brought myself and my brokenness – my identity. I didn't know who I was. So I went forward and stood there thinking, "Now somebody is probably going to come so I'd better be prepared". I said, "Okay, God, we've been here before and if you really…if you're *really real*…if you really are who you say you are in this story, then send someone to help me. First, you send somebody and, second, they say they'll help me". I just stood there, and stood there, and stood there…and nobody came. The music stopped, lights went dim. Finally, I turned to get my coat from the pew where I had been sitting and I said: "Okay, God, if that's your answer, so be it. You know, I've asked you to send somebody and, if you did, I would receive help, if there was any, and, if not, then I won't bother you anymore and I won't be back". Still nobody came.

I picked up my coat and walked to the door. I put my hand on the door to open it and, just then, I heard a voice behind me say: "I'm Mrs. A, the pastor's wife. Can I help you in any way?" I turned around and just looked at her. Everything went through my mind. "You sent somebody – to help me." She could have said anything – Did you enjoy the service?…have a nice night… see you next week? But, instead, she said her name and asked if she could help me in any way. I was so consumed by that, I just sat down and began to cry. She said again, "How can I help you?" I said, "I don't know. I can't tell you anything" because I thought she would say the same thing as the other minister said to me. So I thought I just wouldn't say that word. I'm sure it got in there sooner or later though because I just blurted out my whole life –I probably even said out loud, "What the hell have I got to lose?" I *know* I said, "If I tell you, you won't want me…you'll ask me to leave". She just said, "Well, we'll just sit here and wait until you do tell me".

So I began to tell her everything – all of my story in three words or less, and I guess I did say the word 'homosexual' or 'transsexual' or something like that. And I looked at her and she shook her head…and I said: "You see, that's what everybody does. No help. No hope. I'm sorry I bothered you". I got up to leave and she said: "Please sit back down Marjorie. I shook my head because I just said 'God…help'! And God just told me to tell you that He *can* and He *will* deliver you and set you free." I told her that I had no faith to believe that and she just looked at me so softly and she said: "You don't worry about faith. We know God. You come. You let us love you. We'll show you the Word. We'll befriend you. You ride off our faith for a while." And I did that for some time…and then I got my own faith.

Now this was a Pentecostal church and they really taught me the Word…and I began to grow in faith. When I read "the Word became flesh and dwells with us, among us" I thought, "Jesus is right *here*, in my *heart*. The Word is Jesus, the Word of God…so, He's right *here*…in my heart. *He's in me*!" After that, I pictured myself as a child jumping up on His knee and He'd put His arm around me, and…He'd hold me and… I developed a personal *relationship* with Him. So I kept on going…and there was a real *acceptance* there. I presented myself to be loved and I began to *receive* the love. And I think the first thought that went through my mind was – "If God says, 'I can and I will deliver you and set you free', He must know me. He just talked to me. He must *love* me…and He's going to set me free", because that's what Jesus died for, you know, so I began to put it all together. That was a '*beckoning*' that brought love – there was a *knowledge* of being loved…it was even greater than my senses. Prior to this happening, this awareness that God knew me, I sensed I was not loved. I felt unconnected...*dis*connected. I felt unwanted. Now I was open to *being* loved. I was loved. I was accepted. I was *connected.*

Even though my faith was growing and I felt accepted there, I was still having identity problems, so I went to see a counselor because I figured I needed some inner healing. I was very lonely – loneliness seemed to be the crux of my problem at that point – and she told me that loneliness is a byproduct of anger. As soon as she said that I thought, "Oh my God – I'm angry!" So we prayed together and she told me to ask God anything I wanted to know, so I asked God how I ever got into such a mess. Immediately, I was taken back to the scene of my mother being raped while I was told to lie down and shut up, or else. I had such tremendous guilt. All I could do was ‘go inside’ – that was more wounding than I ever could have been on the outside. I made a vow then to be the perfect gentleman that he should have been. The moment that was revealed to me I saw Jesus sitting with me in the front seat. He said: “Next time you tell that story, you’re going to feel my hand over your eyes and the pain will be gone because I am there”, and it was!

One time, when I was seeking inner healing for my identity, the psychologist I was seeing asked if he could speak to Roger – my male counterpart. By then, I had come to know God and was becoming more secure in my identity – not as a woman but as a child of God. And he said: “Roger, you were a good little boy.” I mean he really *praised* – the first time anybody ever gave me any praise…and for the boy, never mind the girl! He said: “Roger, you were a good little boy. You kept that little seed Marjorie in the palm of your hand. You kept her safe. You kept her alive, Roger. You didn’t take her life. You were a good little boy, Roger. And even as an adult you kept that little seed Marjorie in the palm of your hand. Roger, you kept her safe. You looked after her. You provided for her. You allowed her to live and to have that identity. So, Roger, thank you. Now I’m going to ask you to do one more thing, Roger. Will you take that little seed Marjorie and would you put her in Jesus’ hand?” And the moment he said ‘Jesus’, I said “yes”. I broke. And for the very first time, I let go of that little male identity.

A short time after that, I was at a monastery for a retreat and I *heard* God…*in my head* say: “What did I ask Abraham to do?” And I knew that he had put his little boy on the altar. And this kept going through my mind. Put the boy on the altar. When we walked to lunch, I passed by a tiny little room – a chapel – and I peeked in…and I heard those words. When I left the dining room after lunch, I looked to the left and there was this little chapel – beckoning me – and I heard those words again. “Put the little boy on the altar.” So I went in, knelt down and said: “Okay, God – I know what you asked Abraham to do…and you brought that to my mind…so I take this little boy, Roger, and I put him on your altar”. The moment I said that, I saw, in my mind’s eye – it was so real – there was a fluffy white cloth on the alter, the bible was open, the candles were lit, the bread and wine for communion were on the table. And I told God that I always wanted to kill this kid…and He told me I didn't have to kill him anymore, I just had to leave him on the altar. There was no condemnation. I just said, "*yessir*!" and I got up and walked out.

Later that day, while I was praying, I had a *vision* – it was just as real as I'm looking at you. I was back in Nova Scotia as a little child. I was walking on the beach with my pail and shovel and my britches on. The tide was out and I sat down to dig a little hole. I'd make little sand castles that collapsed as the water came in. The tide started coming in, but this time the water wasn't threatening. I stood up to walk back toward the shore and, as I was walking, I heard the Lord say: "There's a shell…pick up the shell". There was a little white shell there and I bent down, picked it up, and opened it…inside was a little pearl. And the Lord said: *"Marjorie means pearl of great price"*. I closed my little fist and walked a bit further and when I looked down, I didn't't have the britches on – I had on a little white dress. And that little girl in a little white dress walked toward the shore and a young woman walked out. Just as that little seed Marjorie was put in Jesus' palm, Marjorie began to grow a true identity. Later on, I got a name book…and it said that Marjorie means 'pearl of great price'…so, it confirmed what I had heard.

About five years after I was saved, I was in a Pentecostal church service and there was a prophetic word given, it was a message in tongues, and there was no one given to interpretation. So, the pastor told us all to pray and ask God what it meant for each one of us. The message that came to me was that I was to move to Vancouver. I didn't think God would just say to go to Vancouver, so I mentioned this to my pastor and he said, "Okay, you're moving. You're going to Vancouver". Well, I moved and I found myself attending a church that had some semblance of an ex-gay ministry – there was an acceptance there, and even some empathy, but not much else. Before long, I felt myself directed by God to start a ministry. At first, I tried to forget it…but it evolved, everything evolved. I got a job as the custodian of the church and, uh…I kind of made a pact with God that the church building was going to be my 'woman'. I would keep her clean…all shiny and spotless. After a couple of years, I realized that it was time to 'let go' of my 'woman' and to begin a ministry in earnest. I didn't think God would remember, but He did. So I began to get a board together, and I put myself under 'Exodus International'…an umbrella group for ex-gay ministries around the world… …and people came. I never advertised, but we started a support group once a week and the word got out. People would phone me…and others just came. Sometimes other ministers would refer someone and it just evolved from there into full-time ministry. So, I called it 'Another Chance Ministry' because God had given me another chance.

As I was learning and growing in my faith, I kept remembering the promise in those words. "He *can* and He *will* deliver you and set you free". *Deliverance*, to me, meant that God could and would deliver me from the homosexuality. And *freedom* would be freedom to be who I really am in my new identity *as a woman.* The *particular* point of deliverance, though, came while I was seeing a Christian psychologist… I told her I needed to be delivered from this because I knew I couldn't get over my homosexual feelings on my own. I could change my *thinking*, but I didn't know about the *feelings*. Anyway, together we prayed that prayer that whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven and whatever is loosed in heaven is loosed on earth. When she said those words, I envisioned myself all bound up in chains and taken to heaven. When I got there, the chains came off and I came back down to earth loosed. Right after that, I got a violent headache. I never get headaches. She must have noticed something because she asked if I was alright. I told her I didn't know…but I had to leave. So I got in my car…it was November and it was pouring rain…it was really cold. About half way home, I suddenly had to pull over and I got out and I just threw up. And it was red and it was black and it was green and it was yellow. It was every colour of the rainbow. And I'm there, kneeling there on the curb, hitting the cement of the curb with my hand, saying, "It's over…it's over…I *know* it's over." My hand was bleeding. I was a mess…and the vomit just kept coming up and it wouldn't stop. But my mind *connected* with that awareness that *'it'* was over. There was a deliverance that took place…on the spot…at that time. My mind was crystal clear, but I was a mess…my car was a mess. As I drove home, I kept hitting the steering wheel, laughing and giggling all the way, saying: "It's over, it's over, I *know* it's over". The chains came off and I was free. It was an exhilarating feeling – I've never lost that…it has been retained…deposited within me. It's not something I'm 'holding onto'. It was literally *deposited*…and the other was *extracted*…I was *delivered*…and I was *free*.

As I grew in my faith and became more secure in my identity as a child of God, and as a woman, I gained an assurance, a sense and knowledge of being loved, and the process of healing was begun. I began to change. I used to cry an awful lot because I was in such pain but, as my identity grew and I began to change…to see the real 'me', the pain began to subside. The pain that had always been there was because of a lack of knowledge, a lack of knowing who I was and what I was…and as the knowledge came in, the pain left. Identity is such a big thing…it's the knowledge of my *self*, or my identity, that led to deliverance, to change, and to healing. The recognition of my identity and the knowledge of *self*, the true *me*, brought healing, and it brought change. Healing is a process that I went through that led to a change in my 'self'…it didn't happen with a snap of the fingers – it was a process, and it took time. Now my feelings, my emotions, and my will all work together with that self-knowledge to equal *joy*…real exuberance, zeal, and a sense of well-being. I don't know where God begins and I end.

Now, every day, I try to practice the presence of Jesus. By that I mean…I close my eyes and meditate, or visualize…and focus…and we have a two-way conversation. I realize now that, ultimately, *everything* in life is spiritual in a sense because we're all spiritual beings whether we acknowledge God or not and we're meant to be in relationship with Him and with each other. I guess I see myself more spirit than I do soul and body…I see everything in the realm of the spiritual – albeit, I know I'm flesh, too.

So, all of these experiences, taken together, have allowed my spirit to come alive, to receive the healing of body, mind, and spirit, of gender identity, of personal identity, and of my spirit being *fully alive* under God. I'm full of zest, zeal, love, fervency, and joy – exuberance… and a sense of well-being. Now my love is directed differently, too – it's directed towards loving others…in the sense of God's love. Now, I'm much more secure in who *I* am and I have more stable personal and emotional relationships…much deeper and more meaningful.

An Obedient Servant: June's Story

Researcher's Reflections

People spoke about June with obvious respect and admiration. June and I had tried, unsuccessfully, to meet on two previous occasions and had had to cancel for unanticipated health reasons. I had called to make sure we were still 'on' for after lunch and, despite June's adamant protestations to the contrary, I remained mildly concerned that she might not really feel up to our meeting this afternoon. June is a breast cancer survivor, a very dynamic volunteer, and a role model to many in her community.

Journal Entry

My anxiety dissipated when I arrived at June's door and was met with a warm, inviting smile that immediately put me at ease. June is a slender, vivacious woman whose "pixyish" countenance and friendly demeanour suggest an energetic, outgoing personality. Her blonde hair was neatly gathered in a ponytail and she was casually attired in a gray jogging suit. She insisted that I sit in a comfortable rocker nestled in a corner of the living room window to 'be sure I had enough light to take any notes I might want'. The room was filled with homemade crafts, a strong reminder of June's creative spirit, even in the midst of serious illness. June had taken great pains to prepare for our meeting. She had made a fresh pot of coffee and set out a plate of squares, with lovely china plates and napkins. A gas fireplace had been lit and danced lazily in the corner providing a cozy, intimate atmosphere. She assured me that she was feeling well and wanted to devote her energy to "such an important project". I suddenly felt very privileged to be allowed into June's home...I sensed that this was 'sacred space' to her at the moment...and she had let me into her world.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born and raised in British Columbia – so, I'm an 'Island girl' – into a broken, or 'breaking-up', family with one sister, two years older than me, and one brother, ten years younger than me, who died in a terrible car accident in 1992. My mother and father divorced when I was three and my mother remarried a couple of years later. My mother and stepfather also divorced when I was in my teens. So, it was a bit of a rocky childhood and I think I've kept a lot of anger inside over that. I got married at nineteen and have been married to the same man for 37 years. We have two sons, both married, one brand new grandson, and a new grandchild due any day now. We've had our share of trials and tribulations, but I've come to understand that they have been for my own good and, hopefully, for the good of others.

My husband was raised in a Christian home...I was not...although my mother was, unbeknownst to her, sending us to a Sunday school nearby at a very thriving, charismatic

Pentecostal church. So, we'd come home all on fire and she'd be saying: "Don't go too strange on me now". My mother wanted us to grow up knowing God but she didn't want us to go overboard and she could only carry religion so far because she had a lot of guilt over the broken marriages and all. So, there was a lot of confusion around God, the church, and religion at home when I was growing up.

In 1986, when I was 44 years of age, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I had gone to see my doctor earlier that year about some lumpiness in my breast and he had examined me and told me it was just another fibrous cyst...so there was no mammogram done at that time. I was under a lot of stress that year from family problems and I had developed chronic duodenal ulcers...I wasn't keeping my life in very good order. There were just too many stresses that year. That's probably why I became ill, you know, my body not being in harmony.

I would have to say that my spiritual growth really didn't begin until shortly after I had been diagnosed with cancer. Up until then, we were kind of 'sitting on the fence' in this area. We went to church most Sundays, and sometimes in between, but we would often miss going if we'd been to a party or had been out late and wanted to sleep in. I did *believe*, but God wasn't the biggest priority in my life. Once I began to grow spiritually, I looked at a lot of the events that were occurring in my life and I realized, in hindsight, that many of the things that happened occurred because God was preparing me for what was ahead...for *this* happening. For example, I have a very close friend, who was a former girlfriend of my son's...a beautiful young Christian girl with a very strong, mature, and incredibly deep faith. She clearly understood her walk with God...something *I* didn't understand at the time, and even though she had moved to northern Alberta, she kept in touch with me because we had developed a very intimate friendship. I know this may sound...what I'm about to tell you...I know this may sound...kind of 'kooky' to some people who might hear it, but this is really the truth of what happened. I received a phone call from her one night and, she was sitting at her piano playing, and she said: "I'm a little bit hesitant to tell you this, June, but God has told me that I am to give you this scripture from His word. I have not opened the Bible, but I don't dare disobey. I don't know what's going on in your life right now, but God wants you to read Deuteronomy 28: 1-14". My immediate reaction, I must confess, was "Oh really"? You know, here she was all these years younger than me and *she's* been given this prophecy to give to *me*. I dared not believe this coming from God. We talked for just a few minutes and then I went and read it right away. It was all about obedience and the blessings of obedience…I continued to read and verses fourteen to the end of the chapter were all about the curses of disobedience. I felt a little angry when I read *that*, but I was only supposed to read the first fourteen verses – about the obedience.

A few months after that, I went back to my doctor because the lump in my breast had gotten bigger and was feeling rather hard. I asked him if he could order a mammogram, at my request, and he said he would…just to make me happy. I was still only 44 years old. When I had the mammogram, they kept me in there for over an hour and I *knew*. My intuition…I was not told, but I knew something was not right. A week later, the doctor called me back - I sometimes wonder if they just let you sweat it out so they don't have to get the brunt of it, or whatever. My husband went with me to see him and …we were walking down the hallway – he was ahead of me – and he just put his hand up in the air. It was the strangest thing – it was almost like, "don't say anything". I was walking behind him and he said, "Well, June, you do have cancer"…and we weren't even in the room yet…and there were people sitting all around. We went into his office and he just sat down and looked at me, kind of…with his face 'hanging out', you know. I just stared at him. I did not say anything. And he turned to my husband immediately and he said: "If you have a problem with your wife losing her breast then you may as well pack up and leave right now". It was all very bizarre. After that, he arranged for a biopsy to be done at the hospital under local anaesthesia…that was a horrific experience. He froze the area, of course, but there was no sedation or anything…it was awful. I was in a terrible sweat. When I got up off the table, I was soaking wet…and my hair was wet and straight, but I was delighted that it was over…and that I had actually survived it. It was quite an extensive lumpectomy I might add, and I saw it when he put it in this little bottle…sort of a yellowy, ugly mass. A week later I went back and he confirmed that it was cancer – I think he had already known for sure that day when he saw it.

I dealt with it very badly at first…it was very frightening…and certainly a wake-up call. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to get through this…just from the doctor's reaction when he was telling me. So I was thinking: "Oh boy, this is worse than I could ever have imagined. Why…at this time of my life?" My oldest son, who is my real tower of strength, was leaving for university and, while my husband is great, I could sort of see that he wasn't holding up very well himself. I didn't have anybody that *I* could lean on, so I really felt at a loss.

After the lumpectomy, my surgeon sent me to the Cross Cancer Institute and told me that the doctors there would determine the future course of any treatment. When I went, there was a group of doctors sitting around and one of them said: "We've discussed your case, we've seen your x-rays…you have metastatic breast cancer. We've decided to give you both radiation and chemotherapy." It was a real shock, and I just said, "Oh". I was only 103 pounds by then – the ulcers had taken their toll and I seldom ate because fear had overcome me and I was too nauseous to eat. When they saw my reaction, I think they were a little concerned because they said: "Let's just talk about radiation right now…get that other thing out of your head for now because we can see you're overwhelmed". So, I went home. I was just in *such* a state of total anxiety. I couldn't eat *anything*…I was sick to my stomach…I couldn't *sleep*… I'd just lie there twitching my toes all night. I was *so* overcome with *fear*…I didn't know *how* I was going to get through this. So, I called the doctor and he started me on some Ativan so that I could at least get a little sleep.

A couple of days later, I went back to be fitted for a radiation shield in preparation for my treatment. It actually turned into quite a funny day because I ended up touring the whole hospital. I talked to everybody I could…the radiologists, chemotherapy people, other patients. Everyone I talked to was very approachable and very receptive. I wanted to find out everything. At the same time, I was beginning to feel that there had to be another way… some other answer. Something prompted me to call the doctor in charge of my case at the Cross, and I asked him if there were any other alternatives because I wasn't comfortable with having the lumpectomy and all of this treatment…I wanted it to go faster than that. I wanted to be rid of it. He told me I could have a mastectomy…that had never been explained to me. So, after gathering all the information I could about treatment options, and talking to the doctor again, I decided to have the mastectomy. I told him that's what I wanted and he said he would schedule it right away…so there were a couple more weeks of kind of 'sitting around'. I think I actually got rid of a lot of anxiety when I made that decision because I was feeling really good about regaining some control over my life and realized that I was capable of making some decisions. Within two weeks, the surgery was done.

One day, sometime during the two weeks I was waiting for the surgery, I received a phone call from the church offering prayer and any help they could give; of course, I said to please put me on the prayer chain – I would really appreciate that. Then, it was revealed to my by a dear, dear friend that, in the book of James, it says that if you're sick, you should go to the elders of the church and have them lay hands on you and pray over your and anoint you with oil. So, I flipped back to the scripture I had been given in Deuteronomy about obedience and I decided that I must obey. I phoned right away while I felt prompted to do this because I was a little uncomfortable with everything that was happening with me then…so we made arrangements to do it the next Sunday. I can't say I felt any relief, or anything different, right away. I didn't feel like I had been healed or anything…at least, not right then. But what began to come over me shortly thereafter was this…this *peace, this incredible peace… and this feeling of well-being, and a sense of ableness to go on.* Until then, I had been kind of crippled by the fear and all the unanswered questions – all I'd been able to think about were all the negatives that were right there, staring me in the face. When I prayed for healing that day, I thought, obviously, that it would be the healing of the cancer…but what it turned out to be was a *healing of June*…and *her soul* and all of her *fears.* I was instantly healed of the stomach ulcers, though. I never again took another pill for an ulcer. When these things started unfolding. God became very much more *real* to me.

I was in the hospital for about a week. My arm was terribly sore because they had removed all the lymph nodes from under the arm, and I was anxious to hear if that was the end of it. Early one morning when I was barely awake, the surgeon came to my bed and put his hand on my arm and he said: "I'm sorry, June – you're not totally off the hook. You had several lymph nodes that were infected". I didn't speak. He asked me if I had any questions, and I said, "No" – I had too many questions. The nurses asked me if I would like to see a 'Reach to Recovery' volunteer and I said, "I guess so…I don't know… whatever you think". Anyway, this young woman came to visit me – she was very calm and reassuring. She didn't say everything was going to be OK, she just said that she had a radical mastectomy herself and was now 15 years into recovery…that '15 years' just really stood out to me – it gave me some hope and so I just hung onto that. I said, "I just feel like I've been to hell and back". She said, "well, you have…and I have, too". So I knew that she had been there. She emphasized the 'coming back' part because that was very likely to happen. She also told me that, more than likely, life would be greater than it ever had been.

When I was discharged, my doctor told me that I would have to go back to the Cross again. So I knew there was going to be something *next*, and that didn't make me very happy. When I went, the doctors said that because lymph nodes were involved they'd like to do some follow-up chemotherapy. I told them I didn't know if I could handle that because I was *so* sick to my stomach…and I'd heard all these horror stories about chemotherapy. They eventually decided that, since I only had three positive lymph nodes, I was borderline and that it would be a really good idea for me just to go home and recuperate…and to concentrate on getting well and they would see how I did. I began to wonder then, if I was making the right decision because I didn't want to have any regrets down the road. But then, a feeling just came over me that I needed to trust them…and to listen to them…at least they were allowing me some options.

After the mastectomy, I wondered how my husband would view me…and I felt an almost unbearable sadness at first, just this deep, deep sadness, although that didn't last very long. But, I really, really sincerely believe in the depths of my heart that it was not a big issue for me to get over because that was part of the prayer that was prayed over me… the healing prayer. This scar that I had was going to be a reminder to me that God had taken over my life and was going to renew me completely. As it turned out, my husband was very empathetic…he used to tease me about it because he had always called me 'fried eggs' He'd say: "well June, it's not like really you're missing a whole lot". Even my surgeon was able to kind of joke with me and said to me once: "Do you realize what a beautiful job I've done? There's hardly even a mark."

Gradually, the fear began to subside and I was able to take control over more of my life…it was a gradual process…nothing was instantaneous. Within a day or two after I was prayed over, I just started becoming a lot more peaceful, even though I still had had some anxiety about the surgery. Then I began to see that I was being put through this fire for a reason…there's no question of that in my mind. For the next eight years, everything related to my health was quite uneventful, and my faith just continued to grow.

When I was first diagnosed with cancer, I was told I also had a thyroid disorder and low blood sugar, so I was put on synthroid. Then, in 1994, I noticed that my energy level was low, I wasn't feeling as well as I had been, I was becoming very moody, and I wasn't able to swallow very well, either. I went to see my doctor and he told me the thyroid would have to come out, so they did the surgery…and it was cancer. That put me into a bit of a downer, but after that, things went quite well for about two years. Then, in 1996, I noticed a little lump had appeared in the cavity at the base of my throat. It was hard and very suspicious, so I went to see my surgeon, and he looked me right in the eyeballs and said, "June, trust me. It's nothing. It's just scar tissue from the last surgery." Over the next couple of weeks, I noticed the lump was getting bigger. To make a long story short, I had another surgery and it was, indeed, again cancer, so they removed the rest of the thyroid. I remember thinking: "Oh my goodness, that's a death sentence for sure".

I know now that God has created my life for a purpose – I didn't know that for quite a long time, but I have become very aware of that through my experience. I realize that God didn't create my life just for June…he created my life for a great purpose, as he has for every person, so

I know that I'm not to keep it to myself. When He gives me opportunity, I am to share it. He has shown me this and has affirmed me in many instances, which has been truly wonderful…and I give Him the credit and the glory. He has let me see that He's allowed me to go through these different trials to give me the opportunity to share with others. He's given me words when I've had no words…and He's given me scriptures as I've needed them. It's been a total enlightenment for me because, prior to the cancer, I was just 'sitting on the fence'.

I don't think I ever really realized that, once my prayers began, God was hearing them… even though I wasn't seeing the answers right away. But then, God doesn't always come in instantly…it's a process. And God was working this magnificent process in my life that I can see so clearly now. Even midway through my cancer experience, I hadn't realized how much He had done…and was doing. But the growth now is truly amazing. I can see it even when I have a bad day and I think: "Just a little bit of fire today, June, you've got a new lesson to learn." Without the prayer life that I have, I don't know that I could have survived all this. God has provided me with a whole new sense of meaning in my life and my faith has become very strong.

I don't worry about cancer any more because I realize that it's a part of who I am. There is no part of my life that doesn't encompass God any more. I am nothing without my faith. I totally believe that everything is part of God's plan for my life and it's either for my good, for someone else's good, or for both. And…He may just want to take me home at some point, and that's OK, too. I've let go of all of that and I have this incredible sense of peace. Little did I know, when all this began, that God was going to do this transformation of my life…but I have no doubt about what He's doing and what He's done. I guess I also just want to say, for anyone who might read or hear this: "Don't fear whatever comes your way. Embrace it. Because if you embrace it, you'll undoubtedly watch something beautiful and miraculous transpire in your life."

I've never had confirmation that the cancer has been healed, but I can tell you all the other healings that I'm aware that He's done in my life. When I went for prayer and healing that day, God knew what was needed to heal *June* and make her '*whole*'. He's shown me its a process. I also realize that I have no fear of dying now – I had a terrible fear of dying before. "Oh my goodness I might die! Oh what a glorious thing to be with God, you know, forever!" I have told my friends not to fear anything happening to me. I appreciate their prayers and, if it's intended that I should carry on for a while longer, I will, but I have no fear of death at all. I know where I'm going…my brother's there, I have family there, I have so many friends there. I've been with many of them when they were dying and I know they're in Heaven now. I'm going to see them again. I'm looking forward to that eternity with God and with those I love.

Eventually, I started to get asked to speak to various groups about my experiences and my faith… I only have a Grade nine education. So I realize that confidence was part of the healing, too, because I was never intimidated by my lack of education. My spiritual growth just continued and that's when I recognized how much I had changed…and was changing. I had developed so much more faith and trust in God…and then I started to feel more confident about my life…about my faith…about my God…and about myself. I realized that God had fulfilled me in all these other ways. I could see that He was renewing me day by day, and he was constantly creating in me the person he wanted me to be in spite of the cancer. He was fully involved in my life. I remember thinking, "Oh, Lord, you have led me through this for a reason… because look at the affiliations I have now with other people… you've really answered my prayers".

I've actually had two prophetic experiences. One was the phone call I got from my friend about obedience. The second was during a church service…we had a guest speaker –I'd never heard of him before, but near the end of his sermon he walked over and pointed at me and said, "God wants you to read Hebrews 11:6". God had spoken to me about obedience before, and now, midway through all of this, He was speaking to me again. I went right home after the service and looked it up. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it's impossible to please God. If you pray to God, you must believe He *is* God…and He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. I knew then that God wanted me to work on my faith. That had a great impact on me and I began to pray for more faith…deeper, stronger faith. It was an indication from God – 'go forward with your life…you're helping people'

After that, every time I saw someone, there was more purpose behind it. I became a 'Reach to Recovery' volunteer and was dealing with brand new cancer patients. I remembered how terrified I had been and it was easy for me to relate to them and to help to calm some of their fears and to encourage them – it was a really neat experience. And then I became involved with palliative care visits, and that was difficult, but very rewarding. I received affirmation after affirmation that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing and it provided me with a great deal of satisfaction and peace. I was beginning to put together why God had given me these messages…things started fitting. I had asked God to fill my time with useful things when I had asked Him to remove my smoking habit, but now, I didn't have enough time anymore and I began to think, "Okay Lord, don't overdo it".

My main ministry today is with a group of high school girls – I've always *loved* teenagers. I realized that I wanted to be associated with young people and I felt that God was leading me in this direction. I was becoming very tired from all the driving as a volunteer and I thought, "I live close to the high school and, I know I can help these kids". So I started inviting the girls from our church that go to high school over for lunch a couple of times a week. It wore me out some days, but it was sure fun. I had prayed for some kind of ministry because, while I didn't want to drive as much, I still wanted to be used…and it just gradually became clear to me that I should become more involved with these girls. The only prerequisite I had was that we would pray and ask a blessing on the food before we ate. I told the girls that if any of them wanted to bring anybody to prayer, we would be able to do it then, at the same time. Before I knew it, we were joining hands around the kitchen because the group just kept expanding and growing. I've been getting a little more tired lately so now I just have to pray about the energy level…but I always get pumped up before the kids come…and God has given me great sensitivity to these girls. So…who knows where this is going to end.

An Abiding Presence: Anne's Story

Researcher's Reflections

I have known Anne for a number of years as a casual friend and was delighted when she offered to participate in my research. Anne has overcome an emotionally abusive childhood, a poor relationship with an alcoholic parent, her husband's extra-marital affair, and the near-death experience of her youngest son. At her request, I agreed to meet and interview Anne in her home on a cold morning in February. I was looking forward to getting to know Anne more intimately and adding a new dimension to our acquaintance.

Journal Entry

Anne is an attractive fortyish woman with cropped reddish-brown hair and an abundance of freckles. She exudes warmth and a love for family, friends, God, nature, and crafts. Her sense of spirituality is clearly evident in her speech, but I suspect she has not resolved all of her feelings about some aspects of her life, as suggested by an earlier conversation. She describes her spirit as a 'sixth sense' which guides her life and provides a sense of strength, hope, and peace. Anne was emotional throughout the interview and often laughed, or wept, during our time together. Anne's youngest son almost died this past year and is only now slowly recovering from his illness and injuries. He was incorrectly diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and underwent surgery for tumour removal, ending up in the intensive care unit with serious vena caval thromboses and clotting problems following his surgery. Anne also shared that she had had an illegitimate child just before she got married and, two years ago, found her daughter.

Synoptic Narrative

I was born in central Alberta and have lived all of my life here. I'm 49 years old, almost 50, married, with two grown sons, ages 24 and 26. A few years ago, I went back to school and completed a nursing program and started work at the hospital as a Registered Nurse. I was born into a family of eleven – there were nine children, one of who died at about 3-4 months from SIDS. I am the youngest of the family. My mother was married to an alcoholic who was also physically and emotionally abusive, so what I remember most about my childhood is a lot of drinking and fighting. Both of them drank heavily and, eventually, they divorced. Mom used to go out to the bars most days and often brought men home with her, so I was raised mostly by my older sisters…and sometimes my Grandma would help out, too. Our house was always pretty dirty…filthy actually…and there was never much food in the house – we never knew when we might get a meal and often just ate whatever we could find. I recall having to pick up dirty clothes off the floor if I wanted to change my clothes so I could go to school. The guys mom brought home from the bars were pretty rough and very 'grungy' too, and we learned very quickly not to ask too many questions – we knew when to disappear, too, and we would have to 'get lost' whenever they started drinking and 'partying'.

I lost my virginity when I was nine or ten after being molested by one of the men my mom had brought home from the bar, so, after that, I used to sneak out of the house with a blanket and pillow and sleep out in the hills whenever I could. It was purely a survival technique. I actually slept out in the hills a lot, but, if I couldn't get out, or if it was too wet or cold, I would jam a knife under the door to keep anyone else from coming into the room again and I would try to sleep with a pillow over my head so I wouldn't hear anything else that was going on. When I was about 14, I went absolutely "wild" and started drinking and smoking and partying – I just figured it was safer to be 'hanging out' or to be away than it was to be at home any more. My oldest sister, who's 12 years older than me, was married then and I could sometimes stay with her…but then she and her husband were having marital problems by then, and so I couldn't go there anymore, either. I was never really promiscuous, I mean…I didn't sleep with a lot of guys, even though I did drink and party a lot. One night, though, I went to a party in Calgary with some of my friends and I got pregnant.

My life kind of went into a 'holding pattern' about then. I had no place to go so I wound up in an unwed mother's home in Calgary for most of my pregnancy. While I was there, I just learned to live 'day by day' and I did all the chores and the tasks that were assigned to me. And one of the things I learned during that time was that people actually '*lived'* – they didn't just *exist* – I saw that it was possible to *'live another way'*…because I had always thought that my life was 'normal'…that that's the way everybody lived. So…I started to see that things could be different and that I didn't have to live like that anymore – that I could live a different way. By then, I had my baby – a little girl – and I gave her up for adoption. I never thought I'd ever see her again, although I found her through an agency recently…she had put her name in to find me, too. Anyway, we met each other and I heard about her life and her adoptive family. At least now I know she's 'OK'...alive and well, and with a family of her own. I stay in touch with her once in awhile, just to hear how things are but we don't really have a relationship as such.

Sometime between when I was about 14 to 16, before I got pregnant, I had started having nightmares and I was full of fear. I always dreamed that I was being chased and I was so afraid of being caught. Eventually, about the time when I was in the home in Calgary I think, I realized that I was really trying to run *from* my life, and not just *for* my life...and I had also realized that my life could be different from what I had known. So, one of my sisters and I decided to move back to our home town and try to begin our lives over again, but differently this time, and we moved into a basement suite together and both got jobs – I was 16 by then. I got a job as a waitress and life started to turn around for us. I met my husband when I was 17, while I was still waitressing, and when I was 18 we were married. He came from the same kind of alcoholic background that I did, so we both understood each other and we knew that we would have a lot to overcome. We decided that we both wanted to have a different kind of life than we had had growing up. Our lives would be different.

So, as you can see, I wasn't raised in any kind of religious home...in fact, my family was very dysfunctional. It wasn't until I was about 24 that I began to question what life was all about and I became aware of my spirit...when my youngest son was born. I think it took having children to make me realize that life didn't just revolve solely around me...and that children are an extension of yourself. I realized that life was starting to revolve around other people and I had to give more of myself to them...and I wanted the best for my kids. I started to wonder what life was about. I don't know why...I guess it was a time we were going through a tough time back then too. We had made a move...I'd had our first child and then, a year later, I was pregnant with the second one - so I was really confused about my life and wondering where it was going.

We went through...my husband had lost his job and we were going through financial problems and had moved from a small town to the city and I was finding that hard. My husband was busy with his new job and not spending much time with us. I was feeling alone and lonely and I guess having a lot of time to question what life was really all about…and, I can't really remember why exactly, I came to asking God into my life, so to speak. I remember my older sister talking a lot about acceptance and salvation and whatnot. I don't know as I really…when I went into it, it was sort of like, "OK, God. If you are there…and if you exist"…there was still all this doubt in my mind…"then, I sure could use some help down here, you know, getting my life on track". I think it was from that point that I really believe He did come into my life. I began to believe but I hadn't really 'felt' anything then. A few years later, when I was almost 30, I was invited to a local church in town by a pastor that was just out knocking on doors, so I went, and I began to really feel a sense of family and fellowship and worship and really felt welcomed into that. I was really liking it there, so I decided that I would be baptized and really be a part of the church family. I guess that was a real turning point…when I was baptized, as an adult, and just a real giving over of myself to something deep and something more meaningful.

When I was baptized was the first time I felt that incredible feeling of peace. I'm unable to describe it, really…like …so happy, so content inside that nothing could be wrong with the world or anyone around me. It was a really important time for me. I think that was when I first *experienced* the spirit of the Lord, so to speak. Until then, I think I had given my life over to the Lord but I don't think I had experienced that spiritual feeling, that peace, inside. At the baptism, that was the first time and, since then, its been a…just a long slow growth with ups and downs… and times of stronger faith and times of lesser faith, and times of doubt about why some things happen, and times of absolute certainty…but always knowing I belonged to God's family now.

I had gone to baptismal classes prior to being baptized, to really make sure I knew what I was doing …that I knew what I believed and what the values of the church were…and that night, even though there should have been kind of a sadness that my husband wasn't there with me, there was still a real feeling of *joy* inside me that something, some*one*…God, had come into my life…I just can't describe the sense of peace and joy I felt inside. The baptismal font was up on the stage, covered. It was just in front of a large wooden cross and the pastor got right down in that water, in that pool, and we put on gowns and went right in there. He asked me to tell the congregation a bit about my life and why I had come to the Lord…why I was being baptized. I can't remember exactly what I said then. I was kind of nervous up to that point but, after he put me down fully under the water and brought me back up, I had this intense feeling of peace…a peace that I just can't describe. I felt that all would be well with the world as long as I had that sense of peace…whatever I had that night…with me, right here (points to heart)…as long as I had God with me…within me. I have experienced that feeling of peace and love many times since then…not always continuous…but often…that sense of contentment and joy and love. My relationship with God began to grow…and it is a big part of who I am now.

Anyway, one time when I was in a real mess and my life seemed to be really falling apart on me was when I discovered that my husband was having an affair…with someone very close to me, um…it just threw my…blew my world apart. I felt this incredible hurt and pain… my life was literally coming apart on me. It's so hard to describe. I was hurting *so* bad, and *so* much in my life was going wrong, and yet I closed myself in, you know? So, then I would close myself in my bedroom and just cry. Yet, through all of this, I knew that somehow, *someone* understood. I had this sense…inside…that someone was saying "I know what this feels like… I've been there too, and I'll be there for you". So, even throughout all the turmoil and all the hurt…there was a feeling that I would be alright, that I would get through this and that somehow I'd be better for it.

At the time this all happened, I would say that I had a pretty good relationship with God. I had been praying…and I had been studying God's word. I had a strong sense of spiritual 'alignment', you know…well-being. So, when this happened, I was really shaken up. I began to pray a lot more. I didn't pray for…well, ya, I probably did pray for my husband but, when I hit that rocky road, I didn't pray that God would take my problems away or change my husband, I prayed that God would change me…that He would work with me and help me through this situation. I needed God to help me to deal with this issue and to help me to make it through. That was probably the key for me. I couldn't ask God to change someone else, or to take away the situation and make life rosy, but I could ask Him to help me find the strength I needed to get through this. I know we all have to go through hard times and I know I can ask Him and He will, I know for a fact, help me find the strength to cope, to know what to do. So I just prayed that God would help me get through this…and He did.

Of course, our problems were not just over in a day, and they were not over in a week. They were not over in months or even years. Thoughts still come to me sometimes about what happened and yet, somehow, through it all…even though I physically and mentally did not want to forgive him, somehow I was able to forgive. Specifically, I can remember, weeks after my husband's admission of his affair…we had not spoken. We had fought, we had screamed angry words at each other, and lashed out at each other, hurt each other, but we had not *talked* about it. We had been laying in bed and I remember laying there thinking "Lord"…to me, that's God… I remember laying there thinking, "Lord, I hate him. I hate what he's done to our marriage. I absolutely hate him, but I realize that if we're to go on, to get beyond this, I have to learn how to forgive…and I can't right now. In my heart, I hate him with a passion and I can't forgive him. So, if this is what you want me to do…if you want me to forgive him…to learn how to forgive, you will have to allow my heart to change, to somehow be able to do that". And it was like…a warm feeling washed over me, erasing the pain and taking it just…instantly away. 'Poof…it was gone', and I remember rolling over and saying to my husband that, while there was still a lot ahead that we needed to work through, I thought I could forgive him and we could go on from there. I just had this peace wash over me, and the anger was taken from my heart… the bitterness and the anger and hatred for what he had done…it all just disappeared instantly. And that peace, even though the *problems* didn't instantly go away…the problems between us…we had lots to work through, but, instantly, in my heart, I felt a difference. I moved *instantly* from anger and hatred to…to a loving feeling…a peace…a contentment…a softness. I felt a peacefulness, a gentleness, inside after that and I knew we'd be able to work things out and that I would be 'OK'.

For a long time after that I just took my relationship with God for granted and, gradually, I sort of drifted away a little…for a few years. I mean, I still believed in God but I just wasn't praying much and I had stopped going to church. I guess I thought I could just 'handle life on my own'…and I think it takes these trials to…to show me that there are things in life that come along that I can't handle on my own, I just can't. I have a tendency, when life is going well…life seems good and nothing is going wrong, to think I can handle life on my own, you know. I don't think I need God…I can handle my life just fine. Then, something comes along that sort of sets me back and I realize that I do need God…I do need something or someone other than my own capabilities to rely on. My spirit is in God, and God is in me, and I need Him in my life to help me through.

As long as I keep my eyes focused on God, when I'm in a right relationship with Him, I have a sense of peace…a sense of direction in my life. Then I know that, no matter what's going on around me, I trust that God is in control, and I have a peace within me. I know where I'm going…I know what my purpose here is…in life. That's what spirituality is to me…that inner peace and sense of balance. It's like having a sixth sense that guides me…my inner being. It gives me strength to go on, it gives me hope, and it lets me know when something's wrong. There is a solid *presence* in me that I can rely on to always be there…with me…for all time.

About a year or so ago now, our son went through a some pretty major health problems and he almost died…he came very close to dying. As a nurse, I came to realize that the doctors who I thought were very knowledgeable and knew what they were doing…they didn't have the answers…they didn't know what to do. So this was a really *major* trial for me. At first, I had a terrible, terrible fear that my son would die. I was in an absolute panic. I knew my relationship with God wasn't right…it had suffered because, as things were going along in my life, I had slowly drifted away from God a little. I was feeling guilty because, before this happened, I hadn't been praying regularly or communicating with God as often as I should have been. Everything had been going along okay and I felt… I had drifted away a little and I felt that…since I hadn't been communicating with God regularly when things were good, what right did I have to ask Him for help when things were so bad? Why did I only run to God when something was wrong? Why wasn't I communicating with Him before? I guess its like a relationship with anybody…if you're communicating well, it's easier to sit down and talk about hard things. And so I was in this agony of not knowing how to pray or communicate with God. So I asked friends to pray…I didn't know…I was in a blind panic and I couldn't think. Absolute panic. I don't know if it was so much as…because I thought my son was dying…or because I knew that if my relationship with God was right, He could save him and I could be at peace. I was in agony…turmoil…for days. I couldn't pray, I couldn't think. I was in such turmoil…and searching, wondering what life was all about. All I could say was "Please God, don't let him die" but that's all I could say at that point. I asked other people I knew who believed to pray for my son. I phoned people from several different churches and asked them to form prayer chains to pray for my son. Anyway, lo and behold, a miracle occurred and my son did survive and my faith really started coming around again too. I saw that…God had saved my son and my faith grew stronger…and the channels of communication started to open up again. The peace returned, too, and I realized then that this was not just a superficial relationship – it was something I really *needed* in my life.

The next round was that my son was to have another operation. During the day, when I was awake, I was convinced that God was in control and things were going to be all right, but I couldn't control my dreams and I was still having nightmares that my son was going to die…so I must have had *some* anxiety. I was concerned about the surgery because he had had so many complications before…and I was waking up at all odd hours…even if it wasn't a nightmare that woke me up. I would wake with a start at about five in the morning with my heart pounding, knowing something wasn't right and not knowing what to do about it. This went on for a few of weeks…I would wake up with a start thinking that I couldn't let him have the surgery.

I was really confused because I didn't know if God was trying to tell me something, or what, but I knew I didn't want him to have the surgery. And then the rational part of me, the reasonable part, would take over and say "Don't be ridiculous, you need him to have the surgery because you have to know if he has cancer or not. They've got to do the surgery". But, night after night I'd wake up with this feeling, usually about five o'clock in the morning…just 'bang'…wide awake. Something telling me he shouldn't have the surgery. Finally, one day we had an appointment with the doctor. We went into his office and he told us he was going to cancel the surgery because the lumps were shrinking. It was all very mysterious. He didn't have the answers, he didn't know what was going on, he didn't know why the tumours had shrunk…but they had. Right then I knew that things would be okay. I was very calm then and I just kind of smiled because I knew that God had saved him.

When all this happened with my son, I wasn't in a very good place in my relationship with God. I guess I was a bit angry at God, to be honest about it, that He wasn't bringing my husband and children along the same spiritual track as me. I felt that I deserved some kind of reward after all I'd been through…(laughs)…and He should do this for me, you know. So I guess I was angry that God wouldn't let me have that. Now my relationship with God is…its like any other relationship…if I want the relationship to grow, I have to spend time with Him…to really communicate with Him. I know that I communicate with some people on a superficial basis, but there are other people that I relate to on a heart to heart basis…they know my personality inside and out…my faults…and they love me just the same. My relationship with God is like that…it isn't a superficial relationship. I open my heart to Him and He knows me inside and out. I need to spend time alone with Him…in His presence, so I don't lose touch.

When I know my relationship with God is good, I just have such an inner peace...a peaceful feeling and such thankfulness for my life. I have such a feeling of happiness, contentment, peace, security, love, and I feel so cared about. I have a sense that all is right with the world despite what's happening around me, God is in control. I've been through a lot in the last five years. (Anne begins to weep) I'm kind of an emotional person and when something really hits me deep inside, tears spring to my eyes. If it hadn't been for my faith in God, and my relationship with Him, I probably would have ended up on a psychiatric unit. We've gone through so many losses the last few years, besides my husband's affair and my son's near death. My parent's health has been failing, my brother-in-law has died of cancer and I've tried to be a help to my sister. There have been so many ups and downs that I don't know how I could have made it through without my faith. So, when I talk about my relationship with God…it's hard to describe. It's a very private, very personal and very intimate thing…very, very intimate…sacred. It's amazing to have that much love just poured out on me…even though I've done nothing to deserve that love. I just *cannot* put into words this kind of loving relationship where I know I'm in God's presence and I feel His arms wrapped tight around me.

When I feel that my relationship with God is good and my spirit is high and I want to really rejoice, I listen to spiritual music. I like contemporary Christian music and when I listen to some songs, I just get carried away with the music and I just feel so free…and, for no reason, I can just burst into tears because a song will remind me of what's in my heart…the fullness, the peace, the joy, and the thankfulness. When that happens, I feel really close to God…nothing else matters. At those times, I can often visualize myself by a mountain brook with God, my heavenly Father, sitting in the sunlight…together…united…in total peace and silence….absolute silence. I am 'at One' with God…and it's so beautiful.

Chapter Four

> *It appeared that after first contemplating a book on some subject, and after giving serious preliminary attention to it, I needed a period of subconscious incubation which could not be hurried and was if anything impeded by deliberate thinking....Having, by a time of very intense concentration, planted the problem in my subconsciousness, it would germinate underground until, suddenly, the solution emerged with blinding clarity, so that it only remained to write down what had appeared as if in a revelation.*
>
> *Bertrand Russell*

Discussion of Themes and Model Development

After several close readings and re-readings of the participants' narratives, a number of recurring themes began to emerge. Gradually, the themes became distilled and coalesced into six discrete clusters, which were then thematically labeled according to participants' words and phrases. The discovery of inherent themes led to the formation of a two phase conceptual process model of spiritual transformation (see Figure 1, p. 249). The six emergent themes quite naturally 'fell' into two clusters, or phases, of spiritual development following crisis or trauma that will be described and illustrated with specific examples from the participants' personal experiences after a brief initial overview of the model and discovered themes.

As a prerequisite to participation in this research project, each woman had experienced some form of existential crisis or traumatic event that had resulted in prolonged anguish and suffering. As the analysis proceeded, it became apparent that the turmoil lasted, for some, quite lengthy periods of time and was a central element of the spiritual growth experience. Therefore, although the precipitant event that *led* to suffering was antecedent to the spiritual experience, the actual *period of suffering* was a central component of the experience and served as the foundation for the first phase of the model, that of *Dis*-integration

The first phase of transformational spiritual experience identified in the conceptual model, that of *Dis*-Integration, was characterized by features of extreme existential anxiety and a period of acute suffering that was further defined by three distinct themes, including *Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection*, *Questioning 'Being': Wondering and Searching*, and *Turning*

Points: Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other'. The first theme of the *Dis*-Integrative phase, *Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection,* involved the sudden, unexpected collapse, or falling apart, of the participants' lifeworlds as they were previously known. This period was characterized by dissilience and a disconnection from, or severing of, usual personal relationships; participants experienced a painful collage of feelings, including shock, numbness, chaos, panic, depression, fear, and often guilt, resentment, and paralyzing fear.

The second theme that emerged from the data was labeled *Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being':* and involved a period of wondering about existence and searching for answers about the meaning and purpose of life and one's place in the universe. Questions of 'why' and larger questions of ultimacy, ontology, finitude, and eschatology were often considered amidst an agonizing quest for the truth of 'being' and its underlying meaning. Often, questions about God (however defined) and one's spiritual connection with a power greater than self were posed as participants turned inward in self-reflection and personal examination.

The third theme, entitled *Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points:* was characterized by epiphanal moments, or turning points, whereby participants recognized the possibility of 'Other' and an 'other' way of being and living beyond their present circumstances. The turning points, or epiphanies, were typically described as a recognition of the need for, and giving over of self to, some power greater than self, an 'awakening' of spirit, and a surrendering of self to an 'other'. A turning point involved the recognition that life could change and become something different, a new existence. This period was further characterized by a change in perspective, a hopeful attitude toward an anticipated future, and a reorientation to life; it was a point of decision, a time of choosing how one would respond to the suffering and was preparatory to reengagement with the lost lifeworld. Taken together, these three themes constituted a phase of *dis*-integration of the self that led to a state of spiritual woundedness and lasted from weeks to months and even years. The entire phase of *dis*-integration can best be described as a chaotic period of trauma and turbulence, of existential anguish and suffering *in extremis*. Although the phase of *dis*-integration was itself discrete and time-variant, the periods of 'falling apart', 'questioning being', and 'turning points' were not temporally distinct, separate, or sequential; there was frequently movement back and forth between the thematically identifiable patterns of behaviour. All three themes were contextually situated within the period of suffering that immediately followed the traumatic event or existential crisis experienced by each participant.

The second phase of spiritual experience identified in the conceptual model, *Re*-Integration, was characterized by transcendence of the suffering circumstances and transformation of one's self and relationships. The *Re*-Integrative phase was also composed of three, often overlapping, periods, described as *Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection*, *Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence*, and *Recreating and Changing Selves: Transformation.* These final three themes, identified from the participants' descriptions of spiritual experience, paralleled the first three themes in terms of content. Each woman was gradually able to move from the first phase, that of *Dis*-integration (themes one to three), over a varying period of time, to the second phase, that of *Re*-integration (themes four to six) after having reached an epiphanal moment that involved a change in perspective and a choice, or decision, to move forward and embrace an alternative future.

The fourth theme, entitled *Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection*, focused on the women's relationships with others, including God (however defined) or a power greater than self, with self, and with nature. This period was characterized by resilience and a re-connection to one's lifeworld, as well as by the return to a more 'normalized' lifestyle and way of being. Upon entering this second phase of spiritual development, the women were able to reach out and begin to reconnect with their inner selves and with others in their contextual environments. Having made a decision to move forward in their lives, participants were able to regain a sense of balance and structure in their lives.

The fifth theme, labeled *Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence*, describes transcendent insights and actual movement beyond the traumatic situational crises; it occurred within a context of wonder and mystery, or initiation into a new life…a new way of 'being'. During this period, the women generally began to recognize that there may not be any satisfactory or certain answers to questions of 'why' and they began to trust in 'Other' and see themselves in the larger universal landscape of human existence and interconnectedness, part of a transcendent plane with power and knowledge beyond the self. They were then able to develop a tolerance for the uncertainty of life and move beyond, or transcend, their existential anguish to embrace a new, but different way of being.

The sixth and final theme was characterized by transformational changes in self and was labeled as *Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation*. The period described by this theme involved spiritual growth and personal changes in personal perception and locus of control. Once again, although the phase of *Re*-integration was itself discrete and time variant, the periods of 'restoring balance', 'tolerating uncertainty and moving beyond', and 're-creating and changing selves', were not temporally distinct, separate, or sequential and frequently overlapped. The phase of *Re*-Integration can best be described as a time of transcendence and transformation, or spiritual metamorphosis. Progressive movement from the phase of *Dis*-integration to the phase of *Re*-integration occurred over time and appeared to be a developmental process of spiritual change that led from suffering and spiritual woundedness to metamorphic change and spiritual well-being following the critical life experiences. It was a time of resurrection, or re-birth, and a re-creation of life that brought peace, contentment, forgiveness, joy, love, and trust back into participants' lives. The following section describes each of the six themes in greater detail and provides supporting examples from the participants' narratives.

Following the identification of thematic structures and development of the conceptual model of spiritual transformation that emerged from the participants' narratives in this study, I undertook a more in-depth review of current literature that could be used either to support or refute my findings. During this review, I came across an unpublished doctoral dissertation written by Carol Smucker (1993), who had earlier undertaken a phenomenological investigation of women who had experienced spiritual distress. The two-phase conceptual model of spiritual distress developed by Smucker is remarkably similar to the conceptual model developed from my own investigation of spiritual metamorphosis in both its design and emergent themes.

The *'Web of Life'* was the metaphor chosen by Smucker to describe her model of spiritual distress, which includes the two phases, *'Breaking the Web'* and *'Rebuilding the Web'*, both of which occur within the context of time. In the first phase (*Breaking the Web*), Smucker identified themes of falling apart (pain and instability), wondering (questioning), and something beyond (feeling, presence, mystery). The themes outlined in phase two (*Rebuilding the Web*) included stability (strength and security), change and growth (self and beliefs), and wondering (no answers and accepting limits to knowing). Smucker emphasizes that the two phases are interrelated and that movement from one to the other is a process that occurs over time and varies from person to person. The similarities between Smucker's conceptual model and my own model would seem to confirm the structure and add credibility to the conclusions drawn from this investigation. I have borrowed the term 'phase' from her, rather than using the term 'stage', as I had originally labeled the dual aspects of the model, because it more accurately reflects the amorphous nature of the boundaries that exist between the two aspects and the movement back and forth between the phases of the model. I am greatly indebted to Smucker for her thoughtful and insightful work in this area.

Phase of *Dis*-Integration (Suffering)

Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state.

George Eliot

Existential crisis leading to suffering was a prerequisite for participation in this study because of its presumed mediating influence on spiritual growth, as described in the literature. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), suffering may predispose individuals to positive change and the acquisition of wisdom and inspiration. Many others suggest that suffering is an inescapable condition of existence that can often provide the impetus needed for personal change and the appreciation of life (Bowker, 1970; Bolen, 1996; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Frankl, 1959; Kearney, 1996; Younger, 1995). Consequently, the period of suffering precipitated by the crisis event must be examined and understood from the perspective of the participants to determine its effects on subsequent experiences of a spiritual nature. The severity, potential consequences, degree of suffering, and extent of incapacitation imposed by an existential crisis or sudden trauma appear to influence its determinant effects on the spirituality of an individual and were clearly evident in the life stories of each of the individual participants.

The life crises experienced by the women in this research project varied from sudden, unexpected loss to protracted, long-standing periods of stress, and yet, for each of them, suffering was an ineluctable antecedent to spiritual growth. Although nine women were interviewed for this study and described their experiences of suffering, the primary focus of the investigation remained the spiritual growth and change following the critical life event. As the spiritual growth experiences were being analyzed, it became increasingly apparent that the suffering that precipitated the spiritual experiences needed to be explored also. Consequently, it seemed prudent to include an additional participant in the study whose primary reason for inclusion was to focus on and more fully describe the existential experience of suffering. Therefore, a tenth woman (Joanne) was interviewed solely for the purpose of furthering description in this area.

Suffering is one of the primary mysteries of human existence and involves a sense of disconnectedness from relationships and a lack of meaning and purpose in life, according to Cassell (as cited in Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002). Suffering is a pervasive element of the phase of *dis*-integration; moreover, it is at the core of the 'falling apart' theme and must be clearly described to facilitate understanding of the dissilience and relational disconnection, as well as the subsequent questioning of existence and values, that occurs during this turbulent period of trauma and existential anxiety. For this reason, suffering must be briefly explored prior to a more intensive discussion of the remaining themes.

When I thought about and reflected on the participants' stories, I came to understand the pervasive influence of suffering as a mediator of the spiritual growth experience. It became clear from the participants' stories that it was the *response* to the suffering that was adopted by each participant that determined the nature of the subsequent individual experience of spiritual growth. Consequently, I began to examine the influence of crises and suffering in my own life and their role in who "I" have become – how I have changed as a result of my experiences, who I am at present, and how I am continuing to change as I move forward into the future. As a middle-aged woman who has also experienced spiritual growth through difficult life circumstances, and as a co-researcher and explorer with these women, I discovered that I shared many of the same core experiences related to suffering and spiritual development as the women in this study. I have pondered the issue of suffering at some length in my own life and have included some of my personal experiences, insights, and musings as they appeared relevant to the emergent themes of spiritual development.

Suffering and Existential Anguish

As I pondered the nature of suffering, I came to realize that suffering arrives unannounced, uninvited, and unwelcomed. It is a stultifying state, born of pain and anguish, that suffocates the very spirit. I wondered if the word *suffocate* had its root in *suffering*…to be unable to breathe…it somehow seems related. We suffocate when drowning… or lose our air…our breath. We can suffocate a flame…or take away its air. In suffering, life as it has been lived stops, is suspended, and threatens to extinguish…to suffocate…we lose not only our air but also our voice. In times of greatest suffering, we are often unable to breathe, to speak, to communicate; we no longer respire with ease and may feel as if strangling. In times of shock, extreme anxiety, and fear, breathing becomes laboured and speech is impossible; life becomes smothering…suffocating. Communication is impossible and disconnection from others begins. Joanne described the sense of suffocation clearly in her comment: "I felt like I had been hit by a truck; I literally felt like the *wind had been knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe. I felt like I was suffocating.*"

Cassell (1982) defines suffering as "a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person. It occurs when an impending destruction of the person is perceived; [and]…continues until the threat…has passed" (p. 640). Implicit in this definition is a sense of anticipatory loss that is both present and/or future oriented; possible loss or threat, either in the present or the past, may cause suffering because the anticipated losses may occur in the present or in the future (Fordyce, 1988). In existential crises, individuals experience a sudden, unexpected, and profoundly devastating personal crisis, or loss, that is often compounded by the realization that life has been permanently altered or changed in some way and that an anticipated future has been lost. According to Longaker (1997), "Suffering is our agony at losing our hopes and expectations, being forced to relinquish control, and feeling vulnerable and powerless against the undesired change or loss" (p. 48). In other words, it is the loss of one's assumptive world and anticipated future that precipitates suffering. As such, suffering creates chaos in the 'here and now', uncertainty in the 'yet to be', and longing remembrances of the 'what once was'.

The etymological origin of 'suffering' is the Vulgate Latin *sufferire*, and the Latin *sufferre*, meaning to undergo, to be subjected to, to tolerate, or to endure (Onions, 1998) some injury, loss, pain, distress, action, or penalty (Urdang, 1980). To suffer, then, is to endure, to feel distress, to bear. It is part of human 'being' and cannot be avoided. In the sense that suffering is to forbear, tolerate, or endure distress or disagreeable actions, it is a part of human existence and, therefore, a common, inescapable element of the life of all individuals. As a personal and unique experience, suffering varies in its degree, intensity, and effects and persists over time; it is relative to the unique and particular existential circumstances of each individual and has its base in the personal values associated with the perceived loss or threat to be endured. The greater the emotional investment or more strongly the value is held, the greater the potential threat to the individual. Yet, if each act of suffering that individuals endure presupposes a painful personal event or loss that carries with it an integral threat to personhood (self), I wonder, then, is suffering the emotional counterpart of pain and loss – a response to death, to physical disability, to chronic or terminal illness, to emotional or cognitive decline? How significant must loss be before it will elicit suffering? Copp (1990) suggests that suffering is not studied because, like death, it presents a threat to self that, if acknowledged, forces individuals to face the limits of personal existence.

When examining experiences of suffering, the question of whether suffering and pain are the same, and whether they always occur together, often arises. Yet, what of the relationship between suffering and pain…is suffering, like pain, a sensation? Fordyce (1988) links pain with nociception, the chemical stimulation of the nerve endings, yet acknowledges that pain can, on occasion, occur in the absence of nociception (eg. – phantom limb pain) and nociception can, on occasion, occur in the absence of pain (eg. – soldiers wounded in battle without immediate conscious awareness). Nonetheless, pain and nociception remain conceptually linked and distinct from suffering; both concepts are described as signals, or system 'inputs'. In contradistinction to pain and nociception, suffering is described as a response, or system 'output', that is an emotional response to aversive events. Sensations, such as pain, can be traced to specific body parts…the head, a limb, or toe…and not just to "self". Pain is a feeling, a sensation…."I" feel pain and I can identify its location, its characteristics, and its severity; pain can often be alleviated or controlled by distraction, meditation, or medication. Can this be true also of suffering? I do not speak of suffering in my arm or foot or ear, but I say that "I" suffer. I cannot describe where, how, or in what part of my physical being I suffer, and I am unable to relieve my suffering through simple remedies. It would seem that neither can suffering be attributed solely to any one dimension of a person; it is not limited by physical, emotional, spiritual, or social aspects of one's existence. Suffering cannot be reduced; it is the individual, the whole person, the "self" that suffers. As an embodied "self", it is the "I" who suffers. It would seem, then, that suffering is different from pain and can be distinguished by the degree of "self"-involvement.

Still the relationship between pain and suffering bears further examination…does all pain involve suffering…does all suffering involve pain? When I have a headache, I may say that I am in pain, but I am unlikely to state that I am suffering; however, in a time of suffering, I am always able to identify a particular painful event or loss that initiated the suffering, yet I may not complain of pain that is intensely or specifically locatable. Pain may be of relatively short, or lengthy, duration…its intensity may vary and it may begin and end either abruptly or gradually. Suffering, on the other hand, is seldom described as brief or mild. Is it possible to suffer for a few minutes or hours? We often hear that a person suffers intensely, but is it possible to suffer in any other way?…to suffer 'mildly' seems oxymoronic. Although suffering is not, of itself, pain, pain (whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual pain) must be a precursor to, and an essential component of, suffering. It is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the occurrence of suffering.

Numerous authors have identified suffering as a subjective emotional response or psychic component of pain, including the pain of loss or threat to self, whether actual, anticipated, or imagined (Cassell, 1982; Copp, 1990; Flaming, 1995; Fordyce, 1988; Hinds, 1992; Kahn & Steeves, 1986, 1994; Kubler-Ross, 1999; Lindholm & Eriksson, 1993; Singh, 1998; Younger, 1995). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) suggest that, although pain can prompt suffering, suffering is related to one's attitude toward a painful experience. Frankl (1984) maintains that it is one's freedom to choose one's attitude when confronted by unalterable, inescapable adverse circumstances or apparent hopelessness that enables one to discover meaning in life. He asserts that "if there is meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering" (p. 76) because suffering is unavoidable and, without it, life would not be complete. He further states that:

> The way in which a man (sic) accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life....Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. (p. 76)

Cassell (1982) concludes that suffering is also ultimately private and experiential in nature, it is primarily a personal experience, dependent on the perceived individual loss or threat in relation to specific critical events, objects of meaning, and personal relationships.

At times, loss or threatened loss comes suddenly and without warning, as in the case of a traumatic accident or sudden death; at other times, it may be preceded by a prodromal period of anticipated loss, as in chronic or terminal illnesses, which often includes many smaller, serial losses, such as losses in energy and mobility. Yet, every loss that leads to suffering may be seen as a form of self-diminishment. Particularly in the realm of chronic illness, many authors have termed the multiple personal losses that occur as "little deaths" (Lief, 2001, p. 27; Shuman, 1996, p. 60) or as "many little dyings" of 'self' (Lewis, as cited in Carson, 1989, p. 190). Teilhard de Chardin (1974) describes such diminishments as "partial deaths...which form an essential part of our lives" (p. 74) and provide the promise of self-refinement and an ennobled, tempered, and renewed self following some ordeal. Sanford (as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) agrees that suffering is a necessary part of life and essential for spiritual growth. Sanford further maintains that: "It is not peace of mind that brings us to wholeness, but struggle and conflict, and spiritual enlightenment occurs only when a person has been through dark and disturbing trials of the soul" (p. 7). Brehony (2000) concurs with Sanford and asserts that: "Mystics of all spiritual and wisdom traditions agree that suffering is the *only* (emphasis added) key that opens the door to transformation of the soul and psyche" (p. 13). Can this be the 'purpose' of suffering...pressure for change and self re-creation? Or, is suffering purposeless, the result of senseless loss with change merely a by-product? Young-Eisendrath (1996) states that adversity can strengthen and enhance resiliency and self-determination if one guards oneself against being overwhelmed by the suffering. Frankl (1959) stresses that the ability to search for, and the subsequent attribution of, meaning to adverse circumstance is what leads to the human ability to transcend suffering. He states that, "In some way, suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning" (p. 117). Although the phenomenon of suffering is unique to each particular person, it is apparently mediated by the attachment of meaning to the experience. Such was the experience of many of the participants interviewed for this study, as discussed under the six thematic headings.

A variety of diverse meanings have been attributed to suffering in the literature of many disciplines, especially those of theology, sociology, and mythology. Within the majority of wisdom traditions suffering has been variously described as: a challenge, a struggle to overcome, a personal weakness, a punishment, a test, a value experience, and an opportunity for growth and new life or renewal (Copp, 1990; Lindholm & Eriksson, 1993; Teilhard de Chardin, 1974; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). The meaning a person ascribes to critical events and suffering may be inexorably linked to his/her particular religious tradition. For example, within the Judaic tradition, suffering may be perceived as just punishment for the transgression of certain laws or commands that are part of a covenant relationship made with God (Bowker, 1970); it is, thus, considered retributive suffering (Little, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Additionally, within the rabbinic period, suffering was also viewed as a trial that could draw believers closer to God; suffering, as such, thereby also serves a redemptive function and should not be avoided. Within the Christian tradition, Christ's conquest of suffering and death leads to new life; consequently, suffering and death are considered important aspects of a person's identification with Christ and may be viewed as vicarious suffering. To the extent that a person identifies with Christ through suffering, s(he) will receive comfort, strength, wisdom, and hope and, therefore, the gradual perfection of spirit and self (Bowker, 1970; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). In this way, suffering has a therapeutic effect on believers. According to Sharp (1996), Lewis considered suffering to be "God's chisel" (p. 115), used to sculpt and perfect character. Suffering, then, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, may not be viewed as a punishment but as a means for teaching human beings the true nature of God's power and love so that faith may be deepened and an intimate relationship with the Creator will be achieved (Brehony, 2000). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), "whenever God's will is made clearer as a result of suffering, a pedagogical element is present as well" (p. 6).

Buddhists see 'life as suffering' in terms of dissatisfaction, confusion, and incompleteness that must be alleviated and transformed through existential experience (Lief, 2001; Longaker, 1997; Rando, 1984, 1991; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Longaker (1997) also states that "suffering pervades our entire existence" (p. 51) and that happiness and satisfaction are elusive because the objects of human desire are subject to eventual change and impermanence; therefore, unwanted change will always lead to suffering and is a universal condition of humanity. Suffering, within the Buddhist tradition, is described as "that which separates us from engaging in our immediate experience" (Young-Eisendrath, 1996, p. 30); in other words, suffering is considered a separation, alienation, or disconnection from the lifeworld. In many aboriginal spiritual traditions suffering is viewed as a test of strength, courage, and inner spiritual power (Grim, 1983) and, within some humanistic traditions, suffering may be seen as a struggle, a challenge, or an opportunity to be valued. A similar view is held by proponents of most secular wisdom traditions and is evident in the claim that suffering builds character and leads to the attainment of wisdom (Brehony, 2000). Even within pagan and neopagan traditions, suffering is regarded as an intrinsic element of most purification rites and atonement rituals that are requisite cultural components of spiritual development.

Achieving spiritual growth through suffering, as life 'lessons', was evident in Grace's comment that "we come back [reincarnated] because we have new lessons that need to be learned" and June's acknowledgement that God was working a "magnificent process" in her life.

> I can see so clearly now. Even midway through my cancer experience, I hadn't realized how much He had done…and was doing in my life. But the growth now is truly amazing. I can see it even when I have a bad day and I think: "Just a little bit of fire today, June, you've got a new lesson to learn"….We've had our share of trials and tribulations, but I've come to understand that they have been for my own good.

Although suffering may serve a variety of purposes, as outlined above, in virtually all human social systems it is considered a form of tribulation that is necessary for spiritual growth. Campbell (1949) describes suffering as a "road of trials" (p. 97) that serves as an initiation into the great mystery of life. Regardless of the nature of the trauma, it is the struggle and resultant suffering that often precipitates spiritual development. For Grace, suffering was a challenge that needed to be overcome: "It seems that, every once in a while, I just get a really big 'hit'…but…I keep rising to the occasion and coming up again." She further stated: "My life just keeps…it goes with this wind and swirls around a little. And every once in a while, God says, 'OK honey, here comes the mix master'…and He puts it down and sets it on high speed…and I just have to hang on". Even though most faith traditions assign a variety of roles to the purpose of suffering, there are times when the cause[s] will remain incomprehensible; nevertheless, individuals within these faith traditions will generally trust that there is, in fact, some meaning to the apparently senseless suffering experience.

Suffering leaves no one untouched or unscathed. At some point in time, suffering invades every person's life, striking swiftly and wounding deeply, randomly destroying and wreaking havoc upon the lives that it encounters. No one can escape the ravages of suffering; simply by living we are all, in time, destined to suffer. Suffering cannot be predicted or avoided; it can only be tolerated…endured. The human struggling embodied by suffering is marked by physical distress, chaos and turmoil, and a spate of uncomfortable physical symptoms. It is when we are in our greatest pain that we are aware of our place in humanity. We are alive when we 'feel', and when we feel pain in all its fury we are truly aware of living and our existential finitude; we can see more clearly the things that are truly important in life…and the things that don't really matter. According to Lindholm and Eriksson (1993), suffering is always "something evil and something that hurts" (p. 1356); it always involves a difficult and challenging struggle though it also often becomes the impetus for change and growth. Longaker (1997) maintains that it is experiences of intense adversity that frequently lead to spiritual questing and, ultimately, spiritual growth. Singh (1998) states that suffering serves as a "crucible of transformation" (p. 109) and suggests that: "Psychological suffering can be, and in fact usually is, an initial phase in a natural and deep process of transformation" (p. 105). According to Brehony (2000), most mystics would agree that it is by way of pain that individuals are able to come to terms with their true destinies, discover their true nature, and enter into an authentic relationship with God (however defined). She adds that "every religion teaches that pain and suffering are paths to God and self-enlightenment" (p. 13); this process of self-discovery through suffering was termed the "dark night of the soul" (p. 13) by the Spanish mystic John of the Cross. As a precipitant of spiritual growth, then, suffering is the primary underlying feature of the first theme *'Falling Apart'* in the phase of *dis*-integration.

Theme One: Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection

The descent into the depths always seems to precede the ascent.

Carl G. Jung

The first theme, 'Falling Apart' was commonly experienced by participants and described by a variety of metaphors and similes that emphasized the destructive and chaotic nature of the experience that precipitated the growth experience. The word 'dissilience', chosen as a descriptor for this theme, derives from the Latin term *dissilire* meaning to leap apart, burst open, or fly apart (Urdang, 1980). It is characterized by dysphoria, disconnection, turmoil, and turbulence. Anne actually used the words "falling apart" to describe her response to crisis:

> One time when my life was in turmoil and seemed to be *falling apart* [was] when I discovered that my husband was having an affair with someone who was very close to me…it just *blew my world apart*…I felt this incredible hurt and pain…I felt my life was just *coming apart*.

Singh (1998) states that individuals often use metaphors, such as an explosion or a "fall into the abyss" (p. 108) to describe the existential anguish that accompanies life crises. Amanda said her infant son's sudden death "turned [my] life completely '*upside down*'" and left her "floundering and struggling" with her life. Herman (1992) recounts the words of a rape survivor who stated: "I felt as if my whole world had been *kicked out from under me*" (p. 56). Longaker (1997) recounts her reaction to news of her husband's diagnosis of acute leukemia: "My legs suddenly buckled underneath me as I leaned against him, feeling as though *the world were collapsing around me*" (p. 3). A similar sentiment was echoed by Joanne when she stated: "Suddenly my world had come *crashing in* on me…I felt like I had been hit by a truck; I literally felt like *the wind had been knocked out of me*". Prend (1997) likens the collapse of one's world to a "*rug being pulled out*" from under one's feet, a sensation that "one's world [is] *blown wide apart*" (p. 19). Bolen (1996) describes this as the "*ground giving away*" (p. 23) beneath one's feet and suggests that the traumatic event punctuates life, leaving a 'before' and 'after' the critical event when everything changes.

Falling apart implies dissilience and disconnection from the lifeworld; it suggests an end to life as it previously existed in its taken-for-granted manner. Critical life events and traumatic circumstances may arise from a variety of occurrences, such as the unexpected death of a loved one (past or imminent), the diagnosis of a chronic or terminal illness, an unanticipated disability or injury, a psychosexual injury (assault, violation, or abusive relationships), or any other type of major personal loss (material, physical, mental, emotional, social, financial, or spiritual). Rando (1991) distinguishes between physical losses that are easily recognizable and tangible, and symbolic losses that are less easily recognized, intangible, and psychosocial in nature. She states that both physical and symbolic losses result in a sense of deprivation and precipitate a process of mourning. Regardless of whether traumas are intentionally or accidentally incurred, the outcome of physical or emotional assault or some natural disaster, they cause wounding and grief in their aftermath (Shuman, 1996).

According to Herman (1992), traumatic events breach all personal attachments and shatter one's ego identity. Such events "undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis" (p. 51). Consequently, all human relationships are called into question. Buckman (1996) says that it is the closeness of one's relationships that determines the severity of one's sense of personal loss in traumatic circumstances. McCrone (1991) states that individuals in crisis may experience a variety of acute somatic and emotional symptoms, such as anxiety, confusion, depression, withdrawal, alienation, inefficiency, helplessness, hopelessness, and even suicidal or homicidal thoughts. Following any catastrophic crisis, life metaphorically *'flies apart'* and is permanently altered from its prior steady state; this is dissilience and it ushers in a period of chaos, disorganization of the 'self', and disconnection from relationships. Shock and disbelief descend on the person as the mind struggles to confront catastrophic crisis or devastating loss; these sensations are followed by 'psychic numbing', emotional turbulence, a period of withdrawal, and temporary disconnection from relationships.

Shock, Disbelief, Denial, and Emotional Numbing

Shock, disbelief, and a lack of feeling, or emotional numbness were emotions commonly expressed by participants in the initial grip of personal crisis and tragedy. Rando (1984) contends that "just as the human body goes into shock after a large enough insult, so too does the human psyche go into shock when confronted with an important loss" (p. 29). Traumatic shock and disbelief often leave individuals unable to comprehend what is happening around them and they may appear to be *confused* or *dazed*. Raphael (1983) suggests that a sense of unreality is the initial response to crisis, wherein one may feel as if (s)he is living in a dream world or nightmare. Time may seem temporarily suspended as one attempts to distance oneself from the horror of the situation and the realization of its implications. Both of the women diagnosed with breast cancer described their initial shock and disbelief upon hearing their mammogram results and the abruptness with which the news was delivered. A few days after her mammogram, Gloria received a call from her doctor asking her to make an appointment. She told of being ushered into the inner sanctum of her doctor's office:

> I will never forget it because I just sat down in the chair and he looked at me and he said: "You have carcinoma and have to have a mastectomy *now*!" And I remember saying "what?" because it didn't register…at first. He didn't say another thing beforehand… it was just one of those *sudden shocks* you get…and I thought, "I do?"

June described her complete inability to respond immediately after 'hearing the news' from her doctor:

> We were walking down the hallway – he [the doctor] was ahead of me – and he just put his hand up in the air. It was the strangest thing – it was almost like, "Don't say anything". I was walking behind him and he just said, "Well, June, you do have cancer"…and we weren't even in the room yet…and there were people sitting all around. We went into his office and he just sat down and looked at me, kind of…with his face 'hanging out', you know. I just *stared* at him. I did not say anything. I *could* not say anything…I didn't have anybody that I could lean on, so I really felt at a loss.

I wondered about the abruptness and lack of preamble to delivering 'the news' that these women described. While there may be little point to 'beating around the bushes', does it serve the person, somehow, to be so direct? Would there be any benefit to 'softening the blow'? Is it possible that bluntness is some form of medical defense mechanism to ward off the anticipated emotional reactions of 'the patient'? June suggested this might be the case in her situation: "I sometimes wonder if they just let you sweat it out so they don't have to get the brunt of it, or whatever". Although a seemingly plausible explanation, I wondered if an alternative might be that abruptness is a precise, calculated, technical response taught to physicians who are used to 'winning battles' against disease and railing against the bounds of death. Chronic disease and terminal illness are frequently described in terms of 'war' analogies, as seen in newspapers and obituaries, in terms of *'a heroic struggle'* or a *'courageous battle'* against cancer or protracted illness. In one such newspaper article, a young woman described her devastating medical diagnosis by saying: "My *war* against cancer [began] that day as I drive home alone in a *daze* [emphases added] lost in myriad confusing thoughts" (Dhanan, 2001). Is the abruptness and apparent lack of compassion somehow an admission of failure?…or is it merely a compassionate response to induce shock and provide some form of self-protection for both the physician and the patient? In pronouncing diagnoses and prognoses that force individuals to confront their fears of 'self' extinction, physicians must also face their own beliefs and stances vis-à-vis death and the ultimate futility and absurdity of resistance. Perhaps this fear is the reason for abruptness, for, as Longaker (1997) states:

> At the core of any suffering is a glimpse of death. We all have had experiences of profound suffering and loss – shocking changes such as being robbed, losing our home, betrayal by a co-worker, experiencing a prolonged illness, or the grief of losing an intimate partner. Life is a continual dance with change, impermanence, and loss. When we really look into our most painful life experiences, then, we realize that death is no stranger to us. Even though death may seem like a remote event that will be unlike anything we've experienced, we actually suffer many losses in the midst of life that feel as uncompromising as death itself. (p. 47)

Most participants described a transitory *lack* of feeling, or feeling of *numbness*, upon being confronted by catastrophic loss. The initial shock and disbelief produced an emotional numbing that lasted from minutes to days or even weeks and was succeeded by a variety of excruciatingly painful emotional responses, including overwhelming fear, an inability to think clearly, existential anguish and despair, explosive anger, depression, guilt, alienation and withdrawal from others, and other forms of extreme *suffering*. Participants often described feeling "numb", in a "fog", or having "hazy" periods initially following the traumatic event and prior to feeling any violent emotions, except for panic and fear. Joanne described the numbing effect she felt when her world fell apart with an unexpected announcement from her daughter.

> I remember the day we sat in the living room with our daughter who was sixteen. She told us we had nothing to give her and she was leaving and hitchhiking to Vancouver to live on the streets. Anyway, I had this *dead feeling* inside me and grief and self-doubt about my role as a mother. There was just this "*numbing*" feeling…I was consumed with myself and "immobilized…just *numb*" and completely *without feeling*…only that alternated with periods of crying.

Amanda also recalled her shock, numbness, and disbelief at losing her infant son to SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) at the tender age of 32 days:

> When I first saw Daniel in his crib and realized that he was dead, all I could say was, "Oh God...*No!*" I was so panicky and filled with fear at that point that, after those first words, I lost it. I was in such a *fog*...I remember just being really *numb* all over, even physically... you know, even my teeth...I *couldn't feel* them. It was just a very strange experience. I wasn't really 'recording' during that time...I was in *shock*...and *living in a fog*. That part is a bit of a *fuzzy memory*.

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) further emphasize this point clearly by stating that: "Emotional distress, including anxiety, depression, and physical changes, is so extreme in most people experiencing a major crisis that it may produce psychic numbing, and later almost unbearable emotional pain" (p. 66). Longaker's (1997) personal account supports this finding, as she states:

> For four months after Lyttle's [husband] death I was relatively *numb*, existing in a prolonged state of shock. Once in a while I was sad, but the full awareness and finality of the loss I had suffered had not yet hit me. When it did, the sensations of excruciating emotional pain and personal *disintegration* (emphasis added) were so powerful that I felt sometimes that now I was dying. (p. 11)

Prend (1997) suggests that the "brutal impact" and shock of loss, death, or impending death can leave one in a daze because the mind cannot absorb catastrophic information all at once and it is initially impossible to grasp the ultimate significance and all of the ramifications of the loss (p. 9). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) have likened this numbing reaction to "a shot of psychological Novocain" (p. 20) and suggest that it provides a temporary protection from the intense distress of the crisis period. Prend (1997) concurs and states that shock serves as an "emotional anaesthesia" and is highly adaptive because it allows the full impact of the tragedy time to "sink in slowly" so the mind is not overwhelmed and can begin the mobilization of inner resources. Raphael (1983) also suggests that psychic numbing is adaptive because it permits the individual to continue the necessary tasks of daily living during the crisis period; she adds that, "for the most part, [it] is transient and relinquished after the period where it has served an adaptive function" (p. 349).

Rando (1984) maintains that numbness is a common response to the shock of unexpected adversity or trauma that may give way to intrusive moments of denial as the significance of the crisis on one's life is recognized. Buckman (1996) adds that such emotional denial is a normal and powerful coping mechanism of the mind that occurs because of temporary conflict between knowledge and belief. Denial gradually fades in the face of reality, although it will reappear intermittently during the period of shock and numbness. According to Moody and Arcangel (2001), "The function of denial is to protect the psyche from a crisis initially too intense to absorb…it filters out the full brunt of the blow" (p. 98). Almost all individuals faced with the threat of terminal illness experience a sense of shock and disbelief along with confusion and an inability to engage in even simple decision-making. Carrie experienced such confusion immediately after the sudden cardiac arrest and subsequent unexpected death of her husband while playing tennis with a neighbour.

> I heard my neighbour's wife yell to the kids to get me, saying "your dad's gone down", so I grabbed the cordless phone as I ran out of the house and I called 911. My one son had just completed his CPR and stuff, so he and I did CPR on my husband but, you know, as soon as I looked down, I *knew* he was gone….At first, I *couldn't cope* with everything…I was *too numb* …and there were so many things that had to be looked after.

Anne described her inability to think clearly during this 'impact period' as she considered the devastating possibility that her son could die:

> I didn't know…I was in a *panic* and *I couldn't think*…I was in *agony…turmoil*…for days. I *couldn't pray*, I *couldn't think*…I was in such *turmoil*. All I could say was "Please God, don't let him die"…but that's all I could do.

Confusion was also evident in Joanne's description of her behaviour when she faced the prospect of danger emanating from her daughter's decision to live on the streets of a major urban center.

> I was totally wrapped up in myself. I *didn't really know what was going on around me*. I just *couldn't think* about anything else. I tried to get interested in TV or go out, but I just couldn't make myself. I just kept "*zoning out*" whenever I tried to concentrate or do anything. I *couldn't concentrate* on anything at all. I kept *forgetting things* and *repeating tasks without thinking*…and yet, I *couldn't finish anything*, either.

According to Neeld (1997), it is typical to be emotionally confused and preoccupied almost exclusively with the unsavoury experience during this period and to view everything, including oneself, as "unfamiliar, unreal, and unpredictable" (p. 28). The state of shock, denial, confusion, and emotional numbing induced by sudden existential crisis appears to create a needed 'space', a refuge for the mind to gain some temporary distance from the extreme distress and profound anguish that is so much a part of suffering. Psychological numbing generally precedes and gives way to a period of heightened interiority, reflection, and questioning that involves dissilience and a temporary isolation, or disconnection, from others.

Sometimes, the initial shock of a crisis not only produces psychic numbing but also leads to the expression of automatic, almost robotic, behaviours as the person struggles to maintain a sense of normalcy and hang onto the past. This is a period of 'turning inward' and trying to make sense of the situation during which the person may have difficulty completing even routine tasks, such as remembering to eat or sleep. The dissilient period following a life crisis may be confined to a relatively short time span of days, weeks, or months, or it may be extended to many years. Grace suffered for a lengthy period of time as her marriage of almost 25 years began to fall apart after her surgeries, although the relationship had already been in trouble for some time.

> [During the time when I was with my children's father] I was like an *automaton*...I got into being neither black nor white...I was just 'gray'. I would extend...and he would reject. I would extend...and he would reject. And I stopped giving, and then I stopped loving. After they took my breasts and my reproductive organs, I felt like I was just a shell...not a woman, just a shell. That's when he just...*psshhhht*...out of there...he just emotionally 'left' the marriage. That was one of the hardest times in my life. I was just barely 'functioning'...like I was on *autopilot*. I was pretty low. I didn't have much sense of my 'self' at that point in any way, shape, or form.

Joanne also spoke of her behaviour in the wake of her daughter's pronouncement:

> Sometimes I was aware that I was moving about like an *automaton*, awkward and *unfeeling*; I was, strangely, beyond pain... *'numb'*. This wasn't real...it couldn't be. Everything seemed *hazy* and *blurred*, you know? It was *surreal*.

Automatic behaviours and a sense of emptiness, or nothingness, such as those described by Grace and Joanne, are also forms of psychic numbing, according to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). Prend (1997) indicates that, during this time, for many, life carries on almost as before the loss because individuals function on automatic pilot for various periods of time until reality sets in and "feelings emerge in their full fury" (p. 18). For others, it may be difficult to function in social relationships during such periods of intense stress and suffering and thinking commonly becomes restricted to very narrowly circumscribed foci; otherwise, thinking is confused and unclear.

Fear, Uncertainty, and Anxiety

Pervasive fear and extreme anxiety were also commonly experienced emotional responses to life crises described by the participants. According to Shuman (1996), the extreme distress engendered by traumatic crises results from the discrepancy between one's current circumstances and one's former, taken-for-granted world. The fear and uncertainty that is provoked by the prospect of uncertainty and an unknown future produces a systemic physiological response that causes a generalized state of tension and anxiety and leads to biological, psychological, sociological, and spiritual disruptions. The generalized sense of anxiety and emotional arousal experienced in response to traumatic events often persists over time, even well beyond the crisis event (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Herman, 1992) and may lead to a state of hyperarousal and constant irritability that is beyond the individual's conscious awareness. Life has become threatening, and the former stability and relative safety of life can no longer be relied upon; consequently, individuals react with anxiety and nervousness related to the tenuous nature of existence. Prend (1997) states that "irrational fears and even phobias" may plague individuals trying to overcome feelings of powerlessness and adapt to the loss of a former lifeworld (p. 30). Such fear is evident in Anne's statement that, when confronted by the possibility of her son facing terminal illness and an uncertain future, "I was consumed by this *terrible, terrible fear* within me. I was in an *absolute panic*. I thought my son was dying and I was in sheer *agony… turmoil…*for days". June also acknowledged her feelings of extreme fear and uncertainty about her future upon being diagnosed with breast cancer:

> I dealt with it [cancer] very badly at first…it was just so *frightening*. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to get through this…I was just in a state of *total anxiety*. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was so *overcome with fear*…and I didn't know *how* I was going to get through this.

Rando (1984) states that, whenever a person receives a potentially fatal diagnosis, (s)he is immediately thrown into "annihilation anxiety" (p. 210) until (s)he is able to summon whatever psychological resources that are available to assist in coping with the existential threat. Buckman

(1996) suggests that fear of death, in reality, consists of many fears, each of which is specific to the individual facing the possibility of death and each of which may be combined with other fears. He describes various categories of fear, including fear of being afraid (one of the most common fears), fear of physical illness and incapacity, fear of physical pain, existential fear (related to the ending of life and one's non-existence), spiritual fear (eschatological concerns), fear related to personal achievements (or lack thereof), fear related to broken or damaged relationships, and practical fears (related to family survivors, business concerns, etc.).

The physiological response to extreme fear was also evident in the accounts of several participants and manifested in a variety of bodily sensations. June describes her sense of physical unease when left alone immediately following her cancer diagnosis.

> I was left sitting in the room all by myself. My *hands were clenched* and my *knuckles were white*...I felt like *I could hardly breathe*. I was just in such a state of *total anxiety*. Then I went home and it got even worse. I *couldn't eat* anything...I was *sick to my stomach*...I *couldn't sleep*. I was so *overcome with fear*.

Anne, also, complained of difficulty with irrational thinking and with sleeping.

> I would *wake with a start* about three in the morning with my *heart pounding*, knowing something wasn't right and *not knowing what to do*. Night after night I'd wake up with this same feeling...my *heart pounding*...my palms *sweaty*...feeling like I *couldn't breathe*... just 'bang'...wide awake. I was getting more and more *confused* because I thought maybe God was trying to tell me something...and I couldn't figure it out. *I really felt awful.*

Finally, Amanda's description exemplifies the pervasive, paralyzing effects of fear.

> When the fear rises up in me, it's not only emotional. I know it's spiritual because I feel under spiritual attack...it's also a physiological experience...*every part of my body reacts* to that fear. *I feel like I'm going to throw up, I can't breathe, I get diarrhea, my heart races*, and I get terrible...I get a terrible *pain that goes up the side of my face and down into my chest. My ears start to go red and get really hot. I feel just awful all over. The fear is absolutely paralyzing.*

The fear created by the prospect of death, whether one's own or that of a loved on, whether the threat is real or imagined, can be incapacitating in its intensity. Bolen (1996) maintains that the threat one encounters when faced with a life-altering illness is:

> Metaphorically like being abducted into the underworld – that subconscious or unconscious realm – where we are assailed by fears and vulnerabilities that we usually keep buried there

> and at a distance: we may be exposed to fear of death, fear of pain, of dismemberment, dependency, disfigurement, dementia, and depression. The possibility of becoming seriously sick or impaired exposes us to fears and realities to do with the loss of relationships, of work, of manhood or womanhood, of opportunities and dreams. (p. 25)

After years of physical abuse from her mother, and sexual abuse from her brother, Hannah said she avoided doing many things she wanted to because of the profound sense of fear that was her abiding companion. Hannah had left home after high school with the intention that she would attend college in the following year, but she "fell in with the wrong crowd" after leaving home.

> I never went back to school at that time because I had so much *fear*. Many, many of the decisions in my life have been based on being afraid. And I was *afraid* of going to school. I was *afraid* of going to the parking lot and having to walk into the school in the dark…like, what if one of my classes was in the evening? I didn't – I couldn't do it. I always had these memories of my brother in the back of my mind and I was *afraid* of what would happen if I was alone, going to classes in the dark. And I didn't really have a belief that I could do it. I had been convinced that I was bad and that I was stupid.

Following her initial period of psychic numbness, Amanda succumbed to overwhelming fear and hypervigilance related to her surviving children's health.

> I became very, very *fearful*. I developed a *terrible fear* that everybody I loved was just going to die on me all of a sudden. I had to scoop the other kids off to the doctor to make sure they weren't going to die too. I didn't understand why Daniel had died…I'd done all the right things. I'd nursed him…and I'd had him near me all the time.

Hyperarousal, or hypervigilance, is a common response to critical events and is an attempt to guard against the unexpected return of some danger or renewed threat; it is part of the human drive for self-preservation and a protective coping mechanism (Herman, 1992). Prend (1997) recalls the statement of a young woman who suddenly and unexpectedly lost her father and stated: "I became hyper about illness. I guess I got panicked about life being taken away before its time…Life seems so fragile…" (p. 31). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that:

> Fear, and the often accompanying anger, can arise from or prompt feelings of alienation or disconnection experienced in our relationships with ourselves, others, with nature, or with Sacred Source. These emotional responses cause feelings of further separation, which

> engender loneliness, questioning our belonging, wondering about our survival, and sensing the world as an unfriendly and unsafe place. (p. 54)

Vascillation between shock, numbness, denial, fear, and confusion is common in the dissilient period and precedes all attempts at reflection and trying to make sense of the critical event.

Anger, Irritability, and Frustration

Anger is another common emotional response to major life crises and suffering and may be expressed toward others within one's social support network (Herman, 1992; Longaker, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Stoll (1989) suggests that anger may be the product of grief or of a perceived insensitivity of others and may even be directed at those who are well-intentioned and closest to the suffering individual. Anger may be generalized, an amorphous sensation, or it may be specifically targeted. Hannah stated that she was "very, very *angry* as a kid" and "carried a lot of *anger* at mom about the abuse" by her mother and brother. Anne also described feeling "*angry at God*" for not "bringing [my] husband and children along the same spiritual track" and yet guilty, too, because of her anger at God. Feelings of anger, irritability, and frustration are unpredictable and often surface unexpectedly and explosively; they may last for years and can mask deeper feelings of pain and powerlessness (Prend, 1997).

Herman (1992) suggests that almost all psychological trauma results from feelings of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming force and interferes with one's normal sense of control, connection, and meaning. Individuals who are forced to suffer over prolonged periods, or those suffering from chronic or terminal illnesses, may become *angry at themselves* or their bodies for 'betraying' them, or *angry at God* for allowing the crisis event. Lynn described feeling a sense of "*betrayal* by [my] body" when her veins collapsed during injection attempts because they were sclerosed from repeated mainlining of drugs and serial suicide attempts.

> I had tried killing myself before, but I never succeeded, eh? I was hoping I would overdose and that would be the end of it…but it just never worked. Then, I kind of got '*betrayed*' by my veins…I was a pretty good junkie, you know, I took care of my veins but, finally, I destroyed them all and I had to start getting help to line in my neck because I had nothing left…I could no longer get high.

While receiving some psychological counseling for 'inner healing' to deal with her past hurtful experiences, Marjorie said she was able to admit, "Oh my God – I'm *angry*" about so many things in life and recalls spending "most of [my] childhood being '*steamed'* in one way or another". Her anger, according to her psychologist, was transmuted, over many years, into loneliness, confusion, and frustration with her identity. Hannah also experienced long-standing and diffuse anger. Although her anger was initially displayed toward her mother for the physical abuse, it was primarily related to the sexual abuse she encountered at the hands of her brother. Young-Eisendrath (1996) suggests that the expression of anger is useful in suffering; it must be explored and reflected upon in relation to the perceived injustice or unfairness of the loss.

> Anger, as I use the term, is a "moral emotion" (as the Greeks called it). It's the experience of indignant and hostile or retaliatory feeling in response to some perceived injustice. It always involves reflection (because how could you otherwise know that something seems unjust?), and is never an attack on someone or something else….The point of expressing anger is to challenge an unfairness, to respond to an injustice done to oneself or others…. Without that knowledge, other people may intrude in a way that is unnecessarily painful to all involved. (pp. 174-175)

Frustration, anger, and blame, particularly when death, impending death, or significant loss or threat is sudden or unexpected, may be projected onto others who may be seen as responsible for inflicting or contributing to one's suffering (Ellis, 1995; Longaker, 1997). These feelings are considered 'normal' after a loss because individuals are forced to recognize their lack of control over certain events. Anne described her anger in the following account:

> For a few weeks after his admission of the affair, we had not spoken, we had fought, we had *screamed angry words* at each other, *lashed out* at each other, and hurt each other. We were laying in bed one night and I remember laying there thinking, "Lord, I *hate* him. I *hate* what he's done to our marriage. I absolutely *hate* him with a passion right now" and I knew I was going to need a lot of help if I was supposed to learn how to forgive and get over the *anger* and the *bitterness* and the *hatred.*

When anger is expressed and then 'let go of', it provides an emotional 'space'…time for one to begin to accept the loss of the crisis and its attendant sadness. However, if anger remains undirected and diffuse, it can give rise to resentment and standing bitterness (Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Anger that is directed within, toward the 'self', can also lead to overwhelming *guilt* and a sense of remorse that can hinder movement beyond the tragic circumstances (Prend, 1997).

Guilt and Remorse

Guilt also often occurs in situations where individuals believe they are partially or wholly responsible for tragic circumstances and believe that something they did, or failed to do, might have prevented or at least lessened the pain of the devastating loss (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Anne described "feeling *guilty* because, before all this, [I] hadn't been praying regularly or communicating with God for awhile…I guess I had drifted away a little and I felt that…I knew that if my relationship with God was right, He could save him [son]". Critical events may be replayed over and over in the mind in a search for possible clues or signals that might have averted the tragedy, despite one's 'knowing' otherwise. Amanda suffered from guilt immediately after Daniel's death, as well as from an excessive concern and fear for her children. Guilt was an unjustified, yet persistent, emotional stressor that plagued Amanda as she struggled to deal with her son's demise.

> At first, I had a lot of *guilt* over his death; I just kept thinking maybe I could have done something… [Daniel had a fever and was fussy the day before and had only breast fed small amounts.] I think that's what bothered me and why I felt *guilty*…that he had gone with not much to eat…and I wondered if that had anything to do with his dying. I do believe that, ultimately, I hadn't done anything that could have dictated Daniel's death but it did take a little time to really accept that.

Raphael (1983) contends that overwhelming guilt and blame inevitably complicate parental grieving as parents search for an explanation for their child's death. Parents may become preoccupied with their actions, replaying them over and over as they seek clues that might have prevented the death. Guilt and anger are common emotions during the period of grief and may be directed at themselves, as parents, or projected onto others.

Hannah described harbouring a long-standing sense of guilt over the sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of her brother:

> I was raised in a very religious environment that taught against the things that were happening to me, yet I was involved in them…I didn't know they were being perpetrated *on* me, I just knew I was involved and I felt very *guilty* about that. So [that] just *added to the condemnation I felt*…because *I knew it was wrong*…I couldn't separate the reality that someone was doing it *to* me…I believed *I* was doing it.

Herman (1992) maintains that children who are trapped in such abusive situations often assume responsibility for the crimes perpetrated against them by their abusers and frequently believe that *they caused* their abusers to engage in abusive behaviours. Consequently, abused children are often left with problems in developing trust, with intimate relationship issues, and with poor self-image and self-esteem.

Although Marjorie was only a child when she witnessed her mother's rape, she struggled for many, many years with the debilitating guilt she harboured because she was unable to "do anything" to help her mother. Marjorie was an innocent 'bystander' who became a 'hostage' in the car during this very traumatic event.

> They had put me in the front seat and they were in the back seat and, as the date proceeded, he began to rape her. He yelled at me to lay down in the front seat, or else, and I knew that that 'or else' must have meant something a lot worse. It was awful. She was screaming…and I was *so afraid.* I was *terrified* and so traumatized that I couldn't do anything but just stay down there listening to her screaming. I couldn't respond…I couldn't do anything. I had such tremendous *guilt*. All I could do was *'go inside'*…and that was more wounding than I ever could have been on the outside.

Shortly after this experience, Marjorie's mother committed suicide, thereby leaving Marjorie to deal with an additional emotional burden. Guilt is described by Prend (1997) as an irrational and unproductive emotion that arises from suffering and contributes to feelings of *dis*-ease. Despite her cognitive recognition that she could have done nothing to prevent this incident, emotional acceptance was impossible and guilt continued to haunt Marjorie well into her adult years and, she believes, contributed to her lack of personal identity, gender confusion, and lack of self-esteem. These feelings were exacerbated following a later personal relationship crisis and a subsequent suicide attempt.

As Grace's marriage was entering decline, she too described a sense of guilt arising from conflicting personal values. She states she "felt like such a hypocrite" when she began taking birth control pills while still attending a Roman Catholic church. Grace's health was at issue and she was advised by her physician not to attempt further pregnancies because her life might be put in jeopardy, yet she stated: "I wasn't following the rules right and I felt very *guilty* about that…I really did. I couldn't live like that so I chose just to stop going to church and to continue taking the pill". Although Grace faced physical risks from another pregnancy, she was also acutely aware of her disintegrating marriage and was, therefore, even more reluctant to face another possible pregnancy. Forced to abandon her Roman Catholic heritage following the dictate from her confessor, Grace said she felt like 'something was missing' and it was shortly after that that she began her spiritual quest.

Depression and Despair

Depression is another common emotional response to the pain of traumatic events. Once the mind is able to 'let in' some of the pain, numbness recedes and gives way to anxiety or depression (Prend, 1997). According to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), "Although anxiety is more likely to occur when the trauma involves major threat, depression is more likely when the circumstances involve significant loss" (p. 22). During periods of depression, it is not uncommon for individuals to feel a sense of abandonment and despair in which they may be unwilling or unable to engage in activities of self care. June revealed that she "was in a bit of a *depression*" after her mastectomy that caused her to end up on [her] knees praying in *desperation* during her dissilient phase. She described her inability to eat because of feeling "sick to [my] stomach", as well as her inability to sleep, a condition for which she was eventually prescribed sleeping pills. Anne and Joanne also identified such disruptions as sequelae of suffering and depression, as previously illustrated.

Rita Dhanan (2001, June 12), in a recent article in the *Globe and Mail*, expresses feelings of sadness and gloom as she describes her experience with breast cancer and states:

> For me, *every day embodies some grief.* Anger hasn't occurred to me yet. I relate to shock and *sadness. Sometimes a dark, foreboding cloud begins to descend upon me. Its suffocating weight presses down*, reminding me of past years of debilitating depression. (A16)

June, too, described feeling "an intense, almost unbearable *sadness*…a deep, deep *sadness*" while contemplating a mastectomy and follow-up treatment for her breast cancer, a sentiment echoed by Gloria in her statement that she felt a moment or two of "deep *sadness*" a few months after her mastectomy when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and realized that she had lost a part of herself. However, she added that the feeling "just lasted for a couple of minutes" and then she returned to her previous feeling of being extremely grateful for and appreciative of her life. Carson (1989) concludes that depression is a normal reaction to profound loss when one is faced with "the cold, hard facts of reality" (p. 191) and suggests that many depressed people begin to question their abilities and desire to continue living. Herman (1992) maintains that it is precisely at this point that social support becomes crucial for helping individuals to mourn their losses because lack of support will perpetuate the despair and aggravate suffering. Without adequate social support and a sense of community, grief may become pathological and lead to persistent depressive episodes. Depression and despair are dissilient emotions that involve a distancing, or disconnection, of oneself from one's relationships and the world, a turning inward, and leads to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, abandonment, alienation, and despair.

Withdrawal, Alienation, Social Isolation, and Disconnection

Traumatic events often cause such distressing emotional turmoil and angst that a temporary withdrawal from one's social network, or a disconnection from others, becomes necessary to provide the suffering individual with an emotional refuge and 'breathing space' wherein the mind is able to gradually assimilate the new, unwanted reality created by the loss or threat. This withdrawal may be seen as a form of psychic alienation that is generally voluntary but may also be imposed by others who are unable to cope with expressions of distress. Disconnection from others and withdrawal from social situations were described by all of the participants and included elements of *physical, psychological, social,* and *spiritual* isolation. Participants often turned inward to contemplate difficult life questions and attempt to find meaning in their circumstances. Bolen (1996) refers to the need to temporarily withdraw from others and one's environment as "moments of stillness when the eyes seem to turn inward [as] pregnant silences, times when we are communing with our deeper thoughts or perceptions" (p. 18). Social and emotional withdrawal is clearly evident in Joanne's account of her need to withdraw into herself and of her inability to communicate with others in her family who were also suffering:

> For the first few days I could only think of my own hurt and worry…I was consumed by pain. I just *withdrew into myself.* I realized I had a husband and son who were also going through this but we just couldn't talk with each other. I just became totally *wrapped up in myself* and *ignored everyone else.* I was *swallowed up* by my own grief – not only grief and incredible hurt, but really, really scared for what was going to happen to her.

Sudden death or the loss of a loved one, as experienced by Amanda, Grace, and Carrie, even when the loss was temporary, such as with Joanne's daughter, were not the only types of critical events that elicited feelings of withdrawal and disconnection. Anne, in the midst of crisis upon discovery of her husband's affair, stated:

> It's so hard to describe. You can be hurting so bad and so much in your life could be going wrong, and yet, you want to *close yourself in*, you know? So I would just *close myself in* my bedroom and cry.

Prend (1997) suggests that in the midst of the agonizing emotions experienced during shock and disorganization of the self one "turn[s] inward to absorb, process, and face the painful feelings that grief elicits" (p. 48). There is a need to be alone, to draw inward, and to focus internally, while one begins to make sense of traumatic changes.

The loss of, or disconnection from, one's source of transcendent power may also contribute to feelings of alienation or isolation and difficulty in coping with traumatic events. Anne stated that "[her] relationship with God wasn't right" and she "had drifted away [from God] a little" and felt distanced from God. Although Amanda had been raised in a Christian home and had enjoyed a past relationship with God, she too stated:

> When I was eighteen or nineteen, *I decided to go my own way.* I stopped going to church and I think I became too sophisticated to pray. I didn't think I needed that in my life at that time and so *I just left that all behind* and went on about my life. It wasn't until after Daniel died that I began to wonder if that decision had served me very well because I was left really floundering and struggling at that point with having any faith. Later on, I realized that *God hadn't turned His back on me, I had turned my back on Him.* I feel I lost a lot through that dry period…when I turned my back on God.

Both Anne and Amanda were left with feelings of anger and resentment at God, as well as with feelings of guilt for their past deliberate withdrawal or disconnection from God.

Unlike sudden trauma, life threatening or chronic illnesses, such as experienced by Gloria (breast cancer), June (breast cancer), Carrie (permanent disability from injury), and Anne (son's diagnosis of lymphoma), also presented threats to the 'self' or the status quo and created chaos and dissilience and raised questions of survival. Kestenbaum (as cited in Shuman, 1996) states:

> The assault of illness on humanity is not simply physical, it is ontological, affecting our very image of ourselves – our being – and our circumstance – our world. Illness is a transformation of our being-in-the-world, it is not only that; it is an attack upon it, a deformation of it, because it *threatens our integrity* [emphasis added]. (p. 11)

Long-term suffering arising from childhood and adolescent experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as in the cases of Hannah, Anne, Marjorie, and Lynn, engendered similar responses of self-withdrawal and disconnection from one's lifeworld. The primary differences between the suffering experienced as a result of a violent, episodic crisis and that experienced in periods of protracted suffering were evident in the lengthier periods of chaos and turbulence, and the slower, more gradual disconnection of relationships. For example, all four women suffered from various ongoing forms of abuse during their childhood and adolescent years. Suffering was manifested in behavioural changes (Lynn's stealing, drinking, prostitution, and use of drugs; Anne's 'wild' drinking, smoking, and partying; Hannah's 'acting out' for attention, conflict with her mother, and drinking when she left home; and Marjorie's lack of 'self' identity and sexual promiscuity), behaviours that persisted for years until the crises were 'worked through'. In each of these women's experiences, there is a bleak background of suffering that resulted in physical, emotional, social, and/or spiritual *isolation* and *alienation* from the self and others over extended periods of time.

Physically removing herself from the danger of sexual abuse by her mother's 'boyfriends' was one strategy for self-preservation that was recounted by Anne.

> I lost my virginity when I was nine or ten after being molested by one of the men my mom brought home from the bar. After that, I used to *sneak out of the house* at night with a blanket and pillow and *sleep out in the hills* whenever I could…it was purely a survival technique. I actually slept out in the hills a lot… if I couldn't get out, or if it was too cold, I would *jam a knife under the door* to keep anyone else from coming into my room …and I would try to *sleep with a pillow over my head* so I couldn't hear anything else that was going on. I just figured it was a lot safer to be 'hanging out' somewhere else, or to be in the hills, than it was to be at home anymore.

According to Herman (1992), many survivors of childhood abuse try to protect themselves from further harm by running away and/or hiding from others for long periods and may only associate feelings of safety with their chosen places of refuge, rather than with other people.

A sense of physical alienation from one's psychological or spiritual 'self' can also be seen as a form of withdrawal from threat. In a story recited by a young man who had experienced a traumatic car crash that left him a quadriplegic, the young man described his sense of alienation from him 'self' and his physical body: "My body doesn't feel like me, and so I don't feel like me either. I'm a stranger to my body, and I'm not sure there is a 'me' that's not my body too" (Shuman, 1996, p. 45). This incident created an ontological crisis for the young man by calling into question his very 'being' and raised questions of who 'he' was. Gloria also described a feeling of alienation from her 'self' after her hallucinatory, out-of-body experience following her mastectomy: "I just sat there like I didn't know what was happening. I just can't explain how my brain felt…I just wasn't 'me'".

For the women who had endured repeated episodes of physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse, psychic alienation from the corporeal body, or dissociation, often provided a temporary refuge from the physical torture and emotional torment of the assaults. Marjorie's need to "go inside" for self-preservation and 'survival' during her mother's rape is one example of a psychic-corporeal split. Suffering over prolonged periods elicited methods of alienating and insulating the 'self' from the immediacy of further suffering and as a means of survival. Hannah spoke of her need to separate mind from body as a preservation strategy from the time she was very young and recounts her difficulty with 'feeling' sensations; she recalls the words of a counselor she was seeing who spoke to her about "living in [your] head and not in [your] body":

> I remember thinking that she was totally out to lunch. I was ready to flee from her room right then, but I had promised to stay for three sessions, and so I stayed. She helped me to see that I *was* living in my head. I had totally *dissociated myself from my body*...I had just disconnected. I had started dissociating myself from my body as a kid during those abusive incidents so I could survive. I felt that I would die if I stayed in that place, so I just *disconnected from my body*...At times, I still seem to have an emotional detachment, or distance, from parts of my life, particularly in terms of physical sensation.

Herman (1992) states that dissociative reactions are common in children who have been abused and serve as a defensive coping mechanism to help shield the victims from the reality of their abuse. She maintains:

> The capacity for induced trance or dissociative states, normally high in school-age children, is developed to a fine art in children who have been severely punished or abused. Studies have documented the connection between the severity of childhood abuse and the degree of familiarity with dissociative states. (p. 102)

Although psycho-physical dissociation may initially serve as a form of defensive adaptation, it may become progressively malignant in the presence of prolonged, severe abusive situations.

In addition to the psycho-physical disconnection experienced by Marjorie and Hannah, the ability to create emotional distance from traumatic experiences as a means of coping with the painful recollections of abuse is evident in Grace's, Lynn's and Hannah's accounts of 'hazy' or 'forgotten' memories. Grace describes the period of adjustment immediately after her husband's death as "kind of a lost little period of time" when "everything seemed a little hazy". Painful memories of abuse (physical, psychological, sexual) were also sometimes *deliberately* repressed. Like Hannah, Lynn also recalled being both physically and sexually abused from as early as she could remember until she reached her adolescence. Lynn progressed from stealing to drinking, drugs, prostitution, and numerous attempted suicides that she credits to confusion over the childhood sexual abuse and says, "I was basically trying to die" from age eight to nineteen. Of her early childhood, Lynn remarked:

> A lot of those years I *don't really remember*…I try *not* to remember, really…what I do remember involves a lot of abuse…sexual abuse. I told my mother about it once but then, when my mother asked her boyfriend about it, he just beat us both up…and that was the end of that! So, I *don't remember* much of that time. I have very *few memories* from then…except for the abuse…*no good memories* anyway. *I don't even really remember* school.

Hazy memories were also described by Hannah in her comment:

> I *don't really have a lot of clarity* about my childhood – most of my memories are *clouded* with memories of being physically and sexually abused – my brother molested me from when I was very young until I was in junior high…so I don't think about my childhood a lot – if I do try to recall childhood memories, the negative memories get in the way.

The ability to successfully distance oneself from traumatic events and to temporarily "blank out", either physically or psychologically, is a self-protective mechanism, according to Buckman (1996), that permits individuals to tackle reality in manageable pieces and, thereby, to assimilate major life changes and transitions.

It is curious to consider whether withdrawal is conscious or unconscious, voluntary or involuntary, luxury or requisite. Younger (1995) and Young-Eisendrath (1996) suggest that this isolation may be imposed by others who are uncomfortable dealing with raw emotions. Bolen (1996) holds a similar view but provides alternate motivation for the behaviour. She describes the discomfort felt by others in response to suffering and existential questioning in her declaration:

> When we voice concerns and content such as these [existential questions], we are baring our soul. At such moments, we are as if naked and all too often when we speak of such matters, the impulse of others is to hurriedly cover up our words with a thin layer of reassurance – to which we respond by withdrawing. Revealing matters of the soul makes those who dwell in shallower waters uncomfortable. (p. 18)

Yet, several participants suggested that withdrawal might be 'self' imposed when they described their *need* to withdraw and 'turn inward' as a means of survival.

Although none of these participants used the word 'spiritual' as an adjective to suffering, most described not having any sense of 'self' identity, personhood, or personal worth. Hannah described a *lack of personal identity* when she stated: "My whole understanding of who I was and what kind of person I was came from what I was told…and I was told from a very young age that I was a 'bad kid'". Marjorie's existential crisis stemmed from her lack of personal identity, conferred by her rejection by all the significant people in her life…her father, her mother, her teacher, her grandmother, her lover, and a church leader when she had attempted to 'reach out' to others. Her rejection was summed up in her statement:

> I had *no historical or family identity*, *no identity from my father* [called (me) his retriever], and *no identity from my mother* [called (me) 'this thing'], who felt 'stuck with me' and often gave me away, and *no identity from my grandmother* [blamed (me) for my mother's death]. So I grew up not having any sense of belonging anywhere, knowing that I was unwanted, with no role models, and being given *mixed messages about my* [sexual] *identity*. Then, I was fired from [that] job [government discovered (my) homosexuality], and later told by my partner that our relationship was over.

All of this led to Marjorie's later comment reflecting alienation: "I sensed I was not loved. I felt *unconnected…dis-connected*. I felt unwanted." These events heralded an extended period of lack of 'self' identity and years of emotional confusion and gender identity crisis. During this period, Marjorie lived a dual lifestyle, both male and female, depending on her job and current life situation; she was confused and unhappy with her lifestyle, yet unable to change. She stated:

> When I was about eighteen, I began a series of lesbian relationships, the last of which ended in an attempted suicide. I led a homosexual lifestyle for approximately 40 years; in fact, I led a dual lifestyle for that period…some jobs, I dressed as a man and used the name 'Roger'…most people never knew. Other times, I was a woman and had to declare my identity as 'Marjorie'. I lived a double life at that time. I was considering a sex change and taking male hormones so it was easy to change my voice and, since my father brought me up 'male', it was very easy to *be* male. But then, I look at the biological and I think, "but I'm not that"…so I became very *confused about my identity*.

After years of sexual, gender, and 'self' identity confusion, Marjorie's crisis ended in a suicide attempt when her partner of eight years terminated their relationship.

> I was in my motor home, cleaning it, when she called. I was so distraught that I just said, "the hell with life. It's not worth living." I closed the garage door of my detail shop. I turned on the engine, stuffed some cloths in the exhaust pipe, and climbed into the motor home to die. And I just said the same words over again: "To hell with life. It's not worth living. To hell with life – it's over."

Both Marjorie and Lynn had contemplated and attempted suicide repeatedly as a means of escape from prolonged suffering. Lynn's comment that she was "basically trying to die from eight to nineteen" and her serial suicide attempts clearly demonstrate her efforts to extricate herself from her ongoing suffering. Although a suffering individual may create distress in proximate others, s(he) may remain alone and unattended, isolated and separated from others even in the midst of crowds. Suffering is a solitary activity created through profound loss.

Emotional distress may also create a self-imposed psychological and social alienation from others if there is a sense that others cannot possibly understand the anguish and depth of sorrow or suffering that must be endured. Joanne stated that, although she felt she might "be better off going back to work", she had difficulty interacting with co-workers and had to remove herself temporarily from her work environment.

> The staff tried to be supportive but every time anyone asked me how I was doing I started to cry. I knew they were trying to help but I *just wanted to be alone*. I *didn't want to talk* to anyone and I couldn't carry on with my work so, after a few days, I realized I wasn't coping and had to *take some time off*.

Although social withdrawal and physical or psychological alienation are characteristic responses to trauma, McColman (1997) maintains that retreating into a shell of victimization or fearing vulnerability increases social isolation by precluding potential benefits that would be derived from community connections and support, including easing of the suffering. He further states:

> To the extent we are driven by either avoiding vulnerability in the future or being caught up in the drama of the past, our obsession with woundedness *separates us from the present*. This is the saddest irony, for the present is all we have anyway – since the past is only memories and the future is only speculation....We are dominated by anger and bitterness (over the past) and fear (of the future), rather than by wonder (in the present). (p. 47)

When we suffer, we create a privileged place, a space to retreat, to dwell alone, to move from feeling to unfeeling and back again. To turn within, to be alone with our soul while the world temporarily recedes allows us to ponder…to reflect…even in the midst of unbearable anguish. Here we can turn our backs on life and are forced to confront our innermost "self". When we truly suffer, we are not of this world…we reside alone with our torment, hoping to make sense of the senseless. We are alone…oblivious to our surroundings, isolated in a sea of humanity…in a sanctuary of sorts, yet so too like a prison. Then gradually, as meaning takes form and suffering eases, our world and the world of others again become continuous and we move freely from one to another, occasionally wrenched back into our cocoon of sorrow. Finally, ready to rejoin the world, we may find that life has moved on, abandoned us to our solitary refuge, unaware of our lingering sorrow…our suffering seemingly forgotten. And somehow, we must now reach out and reconnect with life, start anew while yet holding in memory a cherished, haunting sense of longing for 'that which was lost'.

Social and emotional disconnection and isolation appear to be distillates of the suffering experience while, yet, they seem, paradoxically, also to be potentiators of the experience. When we suffer, our relationships suffer. The need to withdraw temporarily from life, or disconnect from others, and to be alone to make sense of the suffering event results in our separation and isolation from others. The overwhelming sense of impending threat and the need to protect self-integrity precludes the possibility of sharing or interacting with those around us. Relationships with others are often severed and trust may be broken. There may be a sense of having been 'let down' by life, cut off from proximate others. There is no energy left to care for others; all energy is focused on preserving or regaining a sense of 'self' and on acquiring some balance in life. Lindholm and Eriksson (1993) assert that suffering is being *disconnected* or 'cut off' from important relationships in one's lifeworld. Younger (1995) speaks of the alienation of the sufferer when she describes the withdrawal from relationships that initially occurs following trauma; eventually, however, others also begin to disengage and disconnect from the sufferer, thereby creating an environment of social isolation and alienation. It is typical for traumatized individuals to "feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life" says Herman (1992, p. 52). Thereafter, she states, "a sense of alienation, of disconnection pervades every relationship" (p. 52). This characterization is further supported by Young-Eisendrath (1996), who states that a person who is suffering becomes alienated or 'cut off' from the human circle, feeling different and left out. She describes this as "one kind of misery in human life. The other is the necessary pain of our universal limitations: birth, illness, decay, death, and all of the losses that develop in relation to these" (p. 32). Even though turning inward appears to be an attempt to insulate, to protect the essential core, the 'self', from disintegration, is not such action antinomical? By pulling away from others, we deprive our 'self' of our greatest potential source of comfort…the care and compassion of others. Herman (1992) suggests that, that trauma may also cause some individuals to vacillate between social withdrawal and a fear of being left alone, according to Herman (1992).

> Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. (p. 56)

The aforementioned emotional responses are all common responses to crisis and suffering that may persist for months or even years after the initial event (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Ellis, 1995; Herman, 1992; Hinds, 1992; Kubler-Ross, 1975, Longaker, 1997; McColman, 1997; McCrone, 1991; Prend, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Young-Eisendrath, 1995). Each of the illustrations provided from participants' narrative accounts exemplifies the dis-ease of dissilience, the discomfort, and the *dis*-connection that are characteristic of the suffering that occurs in the 'falling apart' period of the *dis*-integrative phase of spiritual transformation.

Joanne's story exemplifies the thematic structure of suffering and illustrates clearly all the various physical and emotional sensations described by research participants during the period of dissilience and disconnection. In this one brief commentary, she reveals her initial sense of her world 'falling apart' and the discomfort and anguish that followed. Her description captures a range of emotions and turmoil and provides a glimpse of the horrendous power of loss. Joanne describes when her world "fell apart" and came "crashing in" on her.

> Suddenly, my world had come *crashing in* on me. I remember suddenly feeling very *cold* inside myself and momentarily wondering what might, or might not, happen to our lives. As the realization of what I had heard hit home, I felt like I had been hit by a truck; I literally felt like the *wind had been knocked out of me*. I *couldn't breathe*. I felt like I was *suffocating*. My *heart was pounding* and my *mouth was so dry* I *couldn't swallow* and I thought I was going to be sick. I was in a *total panic*; I *couldn't think*. Overwhelming *anxiety* overtook me and, for a while, I really *thought I was going to die*. I struggled against belief but I knew in my heart that this wasn't going to go away. Eventually those feelings eased and I just became '*numb*' again and *couldn't feel* anything. Sometimes the *feelings would return unexpectedly* and it would start all over; when it did, it *came in waves*, unrelenting and all consuming…and then, *mercifully*, I would become *numb* once again. Then I would *try again not to think about it* – you know, to put it out of my mind for a while, but it kept drifting back into consciousness and I was *absorbed by it*. It got so I could sometimes examine what had happened *without feeling* hardly anything – like it must have happened to somebody else. I *wasn't really aware of anything*…at least not consciously anyway.

Theme Two: Questioning 'Being': Wondering and Searching

> *Man never reasons so much and becomes so introspective as when he suffers; since he is anxious to get at the cause of his sufferings, to learn who has produced them, and whether it is just or unjust that he should have to bear them.*
>
> *Luigi Pirandello*

During the phase of *dis*-integration, amidst the suffering and chaos, many participants began to question the meaning and purpose of life. Several wondered "why" the crisis was occurring or had occurred at that point in their lives and began to question long-held personal and/or religious values and beliefs that had previously provided them comfort. Participants without a pre-existing faith or religious background also posed questions of an existential or philosophical nature when confronted by adversity. In virtually all of the participants' narratives words such as 'questioning', 'wondering', and 'searching' were used to illustrate the doubt and speculation engendered by the crisis events. Participants questioned themselves, their actions, and their beliefs, in addition to questioning the existence or actions of God (however defined) or of some power greater than self. Amanda examined her actions in the wake of her infant son's death and "wondered if [she] had anything to do with his dying" or "could have done something" to prevent his dying.

Although several of the participants had been raised in 'religious' homes and indicated a previous belief in God, the crisis event caused them to question their faith. When death claimed an uncle through suicide during her childhood, it ignited a deep desire in Carrie's heart to find some answers to questions she had simply always taken for granted until then:

> One of my uncles, a really, really nice man had died…he had committed suicide and, at the funeral, they said he was in hell. I was very, very upset about that, you know, to think that 'one strike and you're out'…whatever else you had done in your life didn't really matter…that somebody that had been so good was going to hell. I just couldn't believe that…I just thought: *"What's going on? Why is this happening?"* So I had a lot of *questions* and I started to *wonder* about a God that could do something like that….It made me *question God and everything I had been taught* to believe. I began to *wonder* about God…and I began to *question* who was given salvation…and the route to get there.

Unexpected death was also the factor that led Amanda to question her values and beliefs, and even the very existence of God, something she had been taught even as a child.

> Just over a month after my third child was born, he died unexpectedly from SIDS….It was just so horrendous…and I began to *wonder about what life is all about*…you know, whether life is really worth all the pain…and I had to answer some pretty *serious questions*. Until the day that Daniel died, I had never questioned the existence of God – even though I wasn't attending church or praying, I never doubted that God was real. Now, I so *desperately wanted to believe* that there *was* a God and that this all made sense somehow…but *I was really unsure*. I was in shock and just so traumatized... *"If God existed, how could He let this happen?"* This was the most horrendous thing I had ever gone through and probably the most horrifying part of the experience was not really knowing if God even existed – it *shook the very roots* of everything I had believed in and *made me question everything*…I *needed* to know that there was some meaning to all this.

These types of questions are not unusual when tragedy strikes, according to Pearson (1994):

> Sooner or later in grief, most people come face to face with profound questions about the nature, presence and character of God. Often, assumptions about religious belief are challenged by a loss of some kind and decisions reached at an earlier stage of maturity, or 'introjected' (swallowed whole) when fed them by other people, are re-examined – and

> sometimes found wanting. In these circumstances, loss can then propel a person into a painful period of questioning. (p. 9)

A review of the extant literature related to suffering and loss provides evidence that, when catastrophic crises intrude into daily life, individuals are, perhaps for the first time, forced to consider questions of ultimacy and finitude, personal vulnerability, and/or other issues of deepest concern in life (Bolen, 1996; Buckman, 1996; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; De Hennezel, 1997; Dickenson, 1975; Kriedler, 1984; Pearson, 1994; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; Rando, 1984, 1991; Singh, 1998; Soeken & Carson, 1987; Stoll, 1979; Speck, 1998; Taylor, 2002; Winkelstein, 1989; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Buckman (1996) suggests that questions of meaning are often directed at God (however defined) and involve elements of rage (for allowing the tragedy), anger and disappointment (for abandoning the individual), and guilt (for some wrongdoing that led to unjust 'punishment'). Joanne, who had known God but drifted away for some years, exemplified these elements in her comments after fear for her child initiated her into suffering. Her questions also exemplified one of the 'purposes' ascribed to suffering within a particular religious tradition.

> I just kept *wondering 'why'* this was happening to me. *What had I done to deserve this?* I tried to be a good person, a good wife and mother. It just wasn't fair. I felt betrayed and abandoned. I was angry at God. I kept telling myself there *must* be some *reason* for this but I couldn't figure out what it was. I tried to go back over my life to see what I had done. I would have given anything to change what had happened. I just *couldn't understand why* God was punishing me; I was completely helpless…immobilized. *Was this some sort of test? What was I supposed to learn?* I felt my life was over…and I knew I would never be the same again.

Such petitions and demands raise questions of theodicy, as individuals seek to justify God's actions in particular circumstances (Taylor, 2002). Yet, it is at this point, paradoxically, that existential crisis may become a precipitant force for spiritual development. De Hennezel (1997) points to the human propensity to avoid questions of existential finitude and ultimacy as the likely source of suffering and anguish in the following rhetorical question:

> If death is the cause of such anguish, is it not because it sends us back to the real questions, the ones we evaded, thinking that we would consider them later, when we were older and wiser and had the time to ask ourselves the essential questions?" (p. xiii)

It is human nature to struggle with such questions and yet, according to Singh (1998), it is only "when we shift the focus of our attention to these questions of meaning, [that] we notice a profound shift in the way we view everything" and are able to gain "glimpses of the vast Life sourcing this world of appearances" (p. 98). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) suggest that, as individuals struggle with existential questions, they are drawn closer to the truth of 'being' as they live through their experiences.

Feeling trapped in a loveless, dissolving marriage, and wondering about her life after the sudden death of her father started Grace on her spiritual journey.

> When he [daddy] died, I was really devastated and I just wanted to know where he had gone. There was just a black *void* to me, and I *wondered*: *"Where did daddy go? What happened to his soul?"* I wasn't even sure what a soul was…and I went out to try to find a book that could tell me about this…[That] was the *beginning of my spiritual search*…to find out what happened to my daddy's soul….Eventually, I began to search for another church because I felt kind of lost and empty…I needed and wanted something….I was just really, *actively seeking to know God*…I truly was. I was *seeking answers*…and my husband and I just kept getting further and further apart.

The loss of a loved one was not the only type of experience that precipitated existential crisis and a spiritual quest. With Hannah, it was the spectre of death, rather than death itself, that began to work on her mind. Within days, an infant niece and nephew had been admitted to hospital, were diagnosed with serious illnesses, and were expected to die. That same week, she and her family were to have visited friends in another city but had stayed home to attend those families dealing with the unexpected threat of terminal childhood illnesses.

> That was on a Friday and that evening, during the night, their trailer burned to the ground. They had a propane fire and explosion, and the bedroom that we would have been staying in…that whole end of the trailer blew up….As I thought about that over the next couple of weeks, I became aware that, if we had been there, we would have been dead…I *began to wonder, "Why was I spared from that?"* It took some time for the significance of that to sink in. There was a *purpose*…that…for some reason, I wasn't there. *"What had protected me from that?"*

Gloria asked many "what if…?" and "why…?" questions in response to several unexplained events, including experiences of mystery (occurrences of unexplained healing and presence, manifestations of 'Spirit') and pre-cognitive warnings of impending disaster (potential auto accident and actual spontaneous fire in the home). For journalist Rita Dhanen (2001), it was the threat and uncertainty surrounding a cancer diagnosis that precipitated questioning about the bigger issues of life, such as God and the unknown.

> The unknown looms larger, drawing me into its void as I struggle to listen to medical diagnosis and advice. My thoughts are distracted and I'm *thinking about God. Do I really believe in a Divine plan? Does God exist?* Everyone's days are numbered but suddenly my name is called to have my timetable discussed. I desperately want to skip out. (A1)

June also was faced with a myriad of questions upon receiving her diagnosis of cancer. Although she had been attending church sporadically and receiving some teaching, June suggested that, "It is hard to apply some of that bible teaching and knowledge about what God says, unless you can relate it in some way to the trials and tribulations…the fire that God allows you to go through." Yet, she stated:

> I had a feeling that I wasn't going to get through this and I was thinking: "Oh boy, this is worse than I could ever have imagined. *Why…at this time of my life?* During that period of time, I was *seeking…searching for answers* to try and make some sense out of all this.

Serious, potentially fatal illnesses can also transport individuals from the humdrum of daily life into a place of reflective contemplation related to the important universal questions of ontology, theology, and eschatology. Bolen (1996) refers to these questions as "soul questions" that require individuals to descend "into the depths" (p. 19) and face their deepest fears. As a result of the 'descent of the soul' into despair and the subsequent reflection on and contemplation of such questions, one is generally able to recognize the insignificance of many everyday concerns and to connect with the Divine. With reference to serious chronic disease, she states:

> Illness takes us out of our ordinary lives and concerns, and confronts us with big questions and the opportunity of tapping into soul knowledge that can transform us and the situation….At a soul level, we can see clearly what matters and recognize the truth of our

> personal situation….At the soul level we recognize what is sacred and eternal. At the soul level, an illness, even a terminal one, is a potential beginning, a liminal time when we are between the ordinary world and the invisible one. (p. 19)

Despite her belief and trust in God, Anne too was forced to confront her behaviours, values, beliefs, and current lifestyle during her son's health crisis and near death experience. Anne asked questions of herself that made her *re-evaluate* her relationship with God.

> Since I hadn't been communicating with God regularly when things were good, *what right did I have* to ask Him for help when things were so bad? *Why did I only run to God when things were bad? Why wasn't I communicating with Him before?* I guess its like a relationship with anybody…if you're communicating well, it's easier to talk about the hard things.

Sometimes, overwhelming anxiety silenced participants outwardly; nevertheless, questions lurked, pre-verbal, yet within conscious awareness. Loss of voice, or the inability to overtly question one's situation temporarily was evident, for example, when June's physician asked if she had any questions following her mastectomy, she stated that, at first, she couldn't speak; then, she just stammered "No". June was left unable to ask, without a voice for the moment, because she "had *too many questions*" to think about at the time. Asti (2002) experienced similar feelings in response to her doctor's query following a diagnosis of cancer:

> *Questions?* Life as I know it, the life I have greeted every morning of my forty-six years, the life in which I live and move and have my being has come to an end, and *I don't even know the right questions to ask* [emphasis added]. (p. 18)

Bolen (1996) suggests that life-threatening illnesses often take individuals by surprise, leaving them "stunned and without words" (p. 21) as they are plunged into despair. She adds that individuals catapulted into such depths may require "someone familiar with the territory [to] provide an orientation" (p. 21) to the landscape of despair and may be a starting point for reflection.

Not all spiritual journeys were begun as a result of death or impending death. Financial, marital, and health concerns were also critical precipitants that lead to questioning of one's life and/or values. Anne's spiritual search began at about the age of twenty-four when her youngest son was born and she had just moved and was in the midst of financial turmoil and uncertainty. Anne says she began "to *wonder what life was about*":

> I don't know why…I guess it was a [tough] time we were going through…so I was really confused about my life and *wondering* where it was going…my husband had lost his job and we were going though financial problems…I was feeling alone and lonely and I guess had a lot of time to *question what life was really all about*.

Anne, Gloria, and Hannah recalled wondering about God and His power when they were given diagnoses of cystic and lymphatic tumours requiring surgery, yet these mysteriously disappeared. In each case, the consulting and family physicians confirmed the absences but were at a loss to explain them. According to Bernard and Schneider (1996), Searle (2001), and Taylor (2002), it is common for individuals facing serious health and personal challenges to embark on a search to find meaning in their circumstances. It is primarily when individuals are forced to face death that they begin to challenge their previously held assumptions of the world and begin to reflect, re-evaluate, and reconstruct their worldviews to adopt a broader perspective of life.

Theme Three: Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points

> *At a soul level, we can see clearly what matters and recognize the truth of our personal situation. We know that we are spiritual beings on a human path rather than human beings who may be on a spiritual path. At the soul level we recognize what is sacred and eternal.*
> *(Jean Shinoda Bolen, 1996, p. 19)*

At some point during the existential anguish and turbulence of suffering, each participant glimpsed a possibility of something 'other', or 'Other', another way of 'being' that led to a choice or decision that involved a 'will to action' and became a turning point in her life. The turning points for most of the women came quietly with the realization that life was beyond their control and that they could not have prevented the crisis situations. Participants underwent a shift in perception, from a sense of 'being in control' to a sense of vulnerability and 'lack of control'. Each woman then described becoming 'spiritually awakened' and realizing that there was a power greater than the self, an 'Other Being', or way of 'being' that could be relied upon to assist one through life. Recognizing 'Other' often involved the surrender of 'self' control and required a decision to act on the knowledge gained, if one was determined to transcend her circumstances and move beyond suffering. Although the decision to relinquish control over one's own life or to enter into a partnership with a power beyond the self brought about a sense of dependence, it also, paradoxically, spawned a new level of self-reliance.

Perceived Vulnerability and Lack of Control

During the phase of *dis*-integration, when life was falling apart and participants were reeling from the impact of trauma and questioning their deepest beliefs and values about the ultimate concerns of life, each woman reached a moment of realization that she was vulnerable, unable to exercise control over her personal circumstances, and subject to the vicissitudes of life. The acknowledged lack of control expressed by these women induced feelings of powerlessness, a sense of victimization and/or vulnerability, and the recognition of a need for a power beyond the self that could exert some cosmic control over their lives and future events. Each person developed an awareness that control over one's life and/or destiny was merely illusory and that life contained many "dangers" and was exceedingly unpredictable.

The overwhelming emotional distress that accompanies crisis may result from the taken-for-granted, day-to-day life, or perceived 'security' of ordinary living. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) assert that many emotional responses, such as shock and denial, are associated with an "illusion of invulnerability" (p. 80) that human beings function under as a way of living with the possibility of trauma in daily life. When the sense of invulnerability is breached, one is confronted by the knowledge that life is unpredictable and death is inevitable; consequently, one can no longer remain innocent about death and its power to intrude randomly into daily life (Raphael, 1983). In the taken-for-granted approach to daily living, it is easy to erroneously assume that individuals are in control and that things will automatically proceed as they dictate. Consequently, when life doesn't proceed as planned and individuals are unexpectedly faced with critical life events, they may feel that others are in control, that they are being victimized, or that, somehow, circumstances have conspired against them (Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Tragedy may precipitate a sense of victimization and a perceived external locus of control, as was evident in Hannah's inability to differentiate between her own actions and those of others. Her inability to separate what was being done *to* her led to extreme feelings of guilt and difficulty in developing trusting relationships with others.

The anguish associated with any devastating personal loss is related to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and lack of trust in others (Herman, 1992; McIntyre & Chaplin, 2001; Raphael, 1983; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Young-Eisendrath, 1996), and few events trigger deeper emotional turbulence and soul-searching, or result in a greater loss of innocence and perceived vulnerability, than the loss of a child. According to Winkelstein (1989), "The profound spiritual crisis that [parents] may suffer forces them to question their beliefs, struggle to assign meaning to life and death, and attempt to deal with anger against God and humanity" (p. 219) because of the lost future, hopes, and dreams that are associated with children. In describing the realization that she did not have control over everything in her life, Amanda recognized her vulnerability and the uncertainty and fragility of human life:

> I realized how *little control* we really have over things….I knew there were *dangers* [in life] now. I wasn't a child anymore, I was aware of what could happen in life…that it was *dangerous*. Daniel's death really opened up my eyes to the evil that was in the world and that's what I think scared the living daylights out of me. *I don't think I had any sense of the evil or the dangers in life*….All of a sudden *fear* crept into my life for the first time. I had lost a child and come into contact with the evil that was in the world and it was raising havoc with my mind.

Prior to her son's illness, Anne, too, stated that she had gradually "drifted away [from God] a little" and thought she "could *handle* life on [her] own".

> I guess I thought I could handle life on my own…[but] it takes these trials to show me that *there are things in life that come along that I can't handle on my own*…I just can't. When something comes along that sort of 'sets me back', I realize *that I need God…I need something or someone other than my own capabilities* to rely on. I need God in my life to help me through.

Hannah used an analogy of going into the woods to describe similar feelings of vulnerability and lack of control in her life, as well as her difficulties in the area of trust.

> To me, it's like…when you go into the woods and you hear a bear growling in the bushes. You manage to run out safely…*but*…the next time you go into the woods, you're aware there's a bear in them and you're a *little bit cautious*…and while you're enjoying yourself, you begin to forget about the bear. Suddenly the bear comes and he's physically 'in your face' and, as you turn to run, he claws your leg…you get out safely but now you have a scar as a reminder that the woods are *dangerous*. Eventually, you overcome some of your fear and decide to go back because the woods are so beautiful, only this time, you're aware of the bear and are constantly alert to your surroundings. You know the bear can hurt you…you already have some scars to prove it. This time when the bear comes you can't get away and the bear mauls you. You manage to escape long enough to climb a tree but you're badly hurt. The bear leaves, but you stay in the tree because you're hurt, and *afraid*, and you don't know where the bear is…finally, someone finds you and helps you down from the tree and takes you out of the woods. The chances become slimmer and slimmer that you'll go back into the woods again…and, if you ever do, it will probably be when you're well armed for protection.
>
> So then, when someone comes along and says, "come along with us, we're going for a walk through the woods", you're afraid and say "no". They have a naiveté and an innocence that you no longer have because you know the danger and you know the pain. They can't see why you're afraid and you don't want to show them the ugliness of your scars…so you keep them covered…and they don't know. *You know the danger* that can be in the woods…and they don't. But…if you decide to tell them about the dangers and show them your scars, they can begin to understand and to see you in a different way.

Hannah's analogy of being in the woods is similar to Amanda's living in a world that she discovered was dangerous. Both women were referring to a loss of innocence and the inability of others to perceive the potential danger. Somehow, there is now a new maturity, a sophistication, an existential 'knowing' that danger lurks in the world. Others in the world wonder at the fear or anxiety because they may not have faced difficult trials and have not experienced profound loss; they remain innocent, lacking the wisdom that is born of suffering. This is not an intellectual knowledge that comes from conscious awareness, it is an existential knowledge that comes from having 'experienced' suffering. Hannah's reference to remaining 'in the tree' is a form of withdrawal from ordinary existence and is demonstrative of the loss of trust, innocence, and self.

McColman (1997) refers to critical life events, such as the trauma experienced by the participants, as unplanned 'interruptions' in life and states:

> They can usher us into the present moment. They snap us out of the future-oriented plans we are busy making or the past-oriented thoughts we are busy thinking and force us *to be* – in the present, right here, right now. In that sense, interruptions are related to vulnerability.

> Interruptions serve as keys to unlock the present moment – the here-and-now we often ignore in our attempt to keep life under well-managed control. (p. 111)

The interruptions to one's life created by existential crises, such as major losses, the possibility of disability or death, suspicious lumps, altered test results, or unexplained pain, all lead to a recognition of personal vulnerability and have the capacity to induce suffering, along with its associated loss of innocence (Bolen, 1996; McColman, 1997; Raphael, 1983; Speck, 1998; Taylor, 2002; Winkelstein, 1989). 'Interruptions' may change one's attitude or approach to life because one can no longer remain innocent about the inevitability of death or deny its power to affect the lives of loved ones. Lief (2001) suggests that death, or the prospect of death, is "the great interruption" (p. 39) because it destroys one's anticipated future and sets limits on human plans, thereby preventing any assurance of completing one's life journey or mission satisfactorily. Such crises "indicate to people the degree to which they *can or cannot exercise control o*ver their lives, their own bodies, the effects of lifestyle, illness and the actions of others. From time to time in our lives we have salutary reminders of this uncertainty" (p. 24). Crises force us to live 'in the moment' and remind us of the fragility and tenuous nature of life. McColman (1997) states:

> The meta-culture encourages us to live according to the fiction that we can be in control of everything if we only put forth enough effort. Thus, we may feel angry when interruptions rudely remind us that, no, we are not in total control, whether we'd like to be or not. Interruptions remind us who we are. Underneath our carefully constructed images of appearing to be in control, we really aren't – and we think interruptions are lousy because they remind us of that fact. (p. 111)

McColman (1997) indicates that most individuals struggle against vulnerability and seek various forms of self-protection. He further suggests that "vulnerability might be thought of as 'wound-ability,' for to be vulnerable is to be in a situation where a wound is possible, much more possible than we wish" (p. 44). Some individuals may feel that the crisis and resultant suffering are unjust or undeserved and believe they are 'victims' of some unseen force. Although vulnerability and victimization are related concepts, they are not identical because vulnerability suggests potential *future* wounding, while victimization involves actual *past* wounding. Most tragedies and unforeseen traumatic events are not directly under an individual's control; yet, it is precisely their unpredictable, inevitable, and uncontrollable nature that precipitates suffering (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Lynn turned to prostitution and drugs to provide an early sense of control over her abusive circumstances and stated that she "always felt like [she] was in control with the drugs", yet she also acknowledges the *lack of control* over her circumstances when she confided these to her mother, who was also unable to prevent the abuse. Consequently, lack of trust also became an issue for some participants. This lack of trust may have been directed toward others (for failing to protect the 'victim') or toward God (for 'allowing' the tragedy) and often led to anger, a sense of betrayal, resentment, guilt, and questioning about life's meaning. This is not uncommon, according to Herman (1992), because experiences of guilt and helplessness decrease self-esteem and cause "traumatized people[to] suffer damage to the basic structures of the self. They lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God" (p. 56).

Feelings of personal vulnerability and fear of potential further loss and pain initially foster feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection from others, often including one's source of transcendent power, and impede the maintenance and development of relationships, thereby leading to suffering and a decrease in one's overall sense of well-being (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002). It is one of life's paradoxes that the simple recognition of one's vulnerability and the unpredictable nature of one's position in life and the greater universe may also increase one's sensitivity to and appreciation for the sacredness of human life. Bolen (1996) emphasizes that this realization of vulnerability can be reorienting, *a turning point*, that can "bring about a massive change in priorities, and bring to the forefront questions of meaning and meaninglessness about how we are living our lives, about what really matters, and whether we matter" (p. 34). Shuman (1996) adds that:

The notion that humanity is essentially dependent on another source of being for its very existence is perhaps the simplest truth of sacred wisdom" (p. 25)…[and] unless one opens up the field of therapeutic exploration to include the question of ultimate dependency and personal and family beliefs about spirituality and the sacred, opportunities may be missed to identify significant and unexpected fears, as well as resources for healing" (pp. 25-26).

Following the participants' acknowledgements that life was filled with unpredictable and unpreventable dangers, each was gradually able to move beyond a sense of victimization to a sense of the wonder, awe, and mystery of life, despite an awareness of the inevitable trials and personal perils inherent in living. Subsequently, each woman also developed a deep appreciation of life and a 'zest' for living, as well as a renewed trust in the order of the universe and/or in God (however defined) or a Creator power. This became the turning point for each of the participants.

Awakening

Preparatory to making the shift from suffering to spiritual growth was a moment described by most participants as an "awakening" of one's self or spirit. Often, this spiritual awareness became a 'turning point' in the lives of these individuals. Lynn's first glimpse of a possibility of something 'other' than what she knew came during a period in a detox center when she heard others talking about treatment centers and getting 'cleaned up'. She stated she began to think, "Maybe this *could* work, you know…maybe this could work for me!…so I signed up for treatment right then". But it was the birth of her son after an unexpected pregnancy and years of suffering wrought by physical, sexual, and drug abuse and prostitution that resulted in a real spiritual awakening for Lynn.

> When my son was born, from that moment on, there was a recognition of God. I mean, it's one thing for me to be pregnant, but…I didn't really think it was going to happen until I saw him. That was my first real sort of *spiritual awakening*…when he was born. I mean, I couldn't believe it…I have this kid…and it was a perfect birth…a little boy. I just freaked, you know, and when I looked into his face, I knew then that there was a Creator that loved me. I knew that my life didn't have to suck, you know, seven days a week, 24 hours a day…I just saw something better and I thought, "I am never going back!"

As a teenager living in an environment of neglect and abuse, and faced with an unexpected pregnancy, Anne left home and entered a home for unwed mothers. While there, Anne says she had plenty of time "to really think about life", whereupon she arrived at a turning point.

> I learned to live 'day by day' and, as I did all the chores and tasks assigned to me, I learned that people actually '*lived'*...they didn't just *exist*. I *saw* that it was *possible to live another way*...because until then I had always thought my life was 'normal' and that that was the way everybody lived. So, *I started to see that things could be different* and that I didn't have to live like that anymore...that *I could live a different way*. And I remember my older sister talking about salvation and what not...[so I said] "OK God, if you are there...if you exist...then I sure could use some help down here". It was from that point that I believe God came into my life and I started to change.

Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that "waking up" is a central feature of developing spiritual awareness. Awakening to one's spiritual 'self' enhances self-knowledge, facilitates interconnectedness, and enables one to live life fully in the present. Hannah described her new-found 'self' awareness as a result of counseling, also after years of physical and sexual abuse.

> The most significant *turning point* for me occurred during the time I spent a year in counseling because it did *awaken* in me an understanding of myself and it was even more than, you know,...*a spiritual awakening*....I began to recognize that I was more than the sum of the events that happened to me...that's not who '*I'* am. I think the key part of the process was the *spiritual awakening*, for lack of a less used cliché. But it was almost like a...an *awakening* of my spirit. Recognizing that I [had been] broken spiritually. My spirit had been broken....my spirit [had been] *wounded*.

Prior to her divorce after twenty-five years of marriage, Grace indicated that she had been "searching" for 'something' that she could share with her husband. Grace had found a church after being given a pamphlet about 'Science of the Mind' by a friend and begun to attend.

> As I began to get a hold on the idea of spirituality, that was absolutely the *turning point* for me. I began to develop a little *insight* into, you know...what life was really about. That's when I got my *wake-up call*. I began to *wake up* to, you know...*my soul*. I became like a starving person at a banquet...and I just ate and ate. The more I ate, the happier I got. One week, I asked my husband to go with me and he just made terrible fun of every part of it. That's when I realized I had become a little bit defensive because this meant something to me. He did not go with me again, but I kept going and *I began to feel 'myself'...feel my spirit...feel 'me'*.

Gloria referred to her 'wondering' about the unexplained disappearance of fibroids as "one of the first *awakenings*" she experienced with reference to God.

> I realized afterwards, after that happened, that He'd allowed this to happen…or else He had healed me…because if I'd had the hysterectomy, I would never have had my youngest daughter. To me, that was the first one of a kind of…an '*awakening*' that I was aware of…the fact that there's a lot of *power out there* that we can tap into if we really believe. I still believe that, but…at that point in time, it was a real surprise to me. *It was a beginning.*

Marjorie described her spirit becoming "alive" a couple of weeks after her suicide attempt when she attended a church after reading an ad in the newspaper. She stated that the sermon had been about the woman who was "so low that she could only touch the hem of Jesus' garment" and how she responded to the invitation from the priest that was extended to anyone there who would like to do the same thing.

> I was feeling low and so I was thinking: "If I could just get a hold of the hem – *she* was made whole…maybe *I* could be made whole, too". The moment I did that, I knew that my spirit was now *alive* – it had been dead before and now it was *alive*!

Various authors have described spiritual 'awakenings' and suggest that they may occur as a result of an incremental increase in 'awareness' or from a precipitating personal catastrophe or critical event. An awakening may involve a gradual realization that old ways of thinking, being, behaving, or viewing reality no longer 'fit' for the individual (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Carson, 1989; James & James, 1991; Keegan, 1994), it may occur as a spontaneous 'peak' experience or experience of the numinous (Campbell, 1988; Carson, 1989; Day, 1984; Garrett, 1979; Stoll, 1989), or it may even occur as a death or near-death experience (Boldman, 1999; Burns, 1989; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). An increasing awareness that past patterns of living no longer 'fit' for some individuals was evident in the experience of Grace (the increasing realization that her marriage was failing and her introduction into a new religion), Gloria (the consideration of possible past 'healings' and unexplained occurrences), and Hannah (the events preventing her family's being involved in an explosion and fire; the recognition that past abusive events had happened for a reason). It was a peak experience that led to Lynn's spiritual awakening when her son was born, despite medical predictions that she could not carry a child to term due to pelvic inflammatory disease and scarring resulting from long-term sexual abuse. For June, it was the prospect of possible death and personal finitude that became the "wake-up call" she needed to begin her spiritual journey, and finally, for Amanda, it was the sudden death of her infant son that re-awakened her spirit and forced her to consider what was of ultimate value in life. With their spiritual 'awakenings', each participant concluded that there was some meaning and purpose to the events as they had occurred, even though such meaning might not ever be fully understood or even known. Each participant's experience of awakening, whether gradual or sudden, involved elements of transcendence and moved her to a new level of awareness, a new perspective of the precipitating event, and a new outlook on life and her way of being.

When faced with a diagnosis of cancer, Gloria's past familiarity with God also led to a sense of anticipation and preparation for what was to come that became a turning point in her life. Gloria reflected on her past experiences in the following statement.

> I was alone for many, many hours every day, with no children left at home, in a new city…and it was pretty lonely and quiet. So I had plenty of time for reading. I was reading my bible a lot, and it seemed that every time I read anything in scripture, it was giving me assurance that I would be 'OK'. It didn't make any sense to me at the time [but] I just kept…sort of *wondering what was going to happen.* So, when the doctor told me that day that I had carcinoma, I remember feeling almost…glad. I know that may sound strange but I thought, "This is why I've been *prepared.* This is why all this has been happening to me"…and I had no fear. My faith just grew from that moment on. That's when the whole process of spiritual change began.

For some others who had also had a previous exposure to or belief in God, the recognition of spiritual awareness and meaning was ascribed to the experience only after some reflection. These participants often described a sense of having been prepared for the coming crises. June stated:

> I did believe, but God wasn't the biggest priority in my life. Once I had begun to grow spiritually, I looked at a lot of the events that [had] occurred in my life and I realized, *in hindsight*, that many of the things that had happened occurred because God was *preparing me* for what was ahead. He removed the bad habit [smoking], *preparing me physically* to get well. He put a camera into my hands…*preparing me mentally* to get well. He provided me with prophecies…*preparing me spiritually* for healing. *In hindsight*, I realize that I had been *prepared for this*, actually, for quite some time.

In reviewing the events that kept her family from being present during her friend's trailer fire, Hannah commented:

> I have a belief in my spirit now that tells me God did that…He intervened. It was beyond what my understanding at that time would allow. *In retrospect*, I can see that *it was God's hand in all of this.*

Confrontation with the possibility of serious, life-threatening illness, personal loss, or death can be a "wake-up call", according to Bolen (1996) and Young-Eisendrath (1996), a phrase employed specifically by June, which compels individuals to develop an awareness of the responsibility for and fragility of life. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) suggest that lack of awareness is like being in a trance from which one's spirit calls one to awaken; they state that "Spiritual literature and teachings across traditions reflect that 'waking up', 'seeing clearly', [and] 'developing awareness' are at the core of the spiritual journey" (p. 158).

Surrendering

Following each participant's acknowledgement of personal vulnerability of lack of control over her personal destiny came a desire or need to surrender control and a decision to trust one's life to a power beyond the self. Although few participants actually uttered the word 'surrender', virtually all of them described needing to relinquish control over their lives to God (however defined) in order to move on with their lives and transcend their present circumstances. Gloria reported surrendering herself and feeling a sense of assurance that "everything would be OK" following the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, and 'gift of tongues' that she received three days prior to her surgery.

> It was a confirmation of everything I had been feeling [about the upcoming surgery]...the peace...and the assurance that everything would be OK and I had nothing to fear. I just *surrendered myself* to the Holy Spirit and to God...and *I just completely turned my life, everything, over to Him* at that time. I felt absolute joy and amazement and I just kept thinking, "it's real...it's really real!" It was a very religious experience and it certainly just reinforced my faith.

Hannah, too, described the essence of surrender, although she did not actually use the word, when she was faced with the possibility of surgery for a painful cyst and was praying one evening.

> I just...I laid there and I said, "everything within me...with everything that is a part of me, every little bit of my being, *I turn over* Lord to you".

Anne said that her baptism as an adult became a turning point in her life, a time when there was "just a real *giving over of myself* to something deep and something more meaningful". For June, the act of surrender was described as "obedience" to God following receipt of a "prophesy" when she went to her church elders for the rituals of 'the laying on of hands' and 'anointing with oil'.

When Marjorie heard the "voice of God in [my] head" ask her what Abraham had done, she knew that he had been asked to sacrifice his son and she stated that she knew she had to surrender her identity to God. Her surrender, like June's, was manifested in an act of obedience.

> And this kept going through my mind, 'put the little boy on the altar' and, as we walked to lunch, I just kept hearing those words. So I went in and I knelt down and said: "Okay, God – I know what you asked Abraham to do, and you brought that to my mind, so I take this little boy, Roger [male identity] and I put him on your altar". God told me I just had to leave him on the altar…there was no condemnation. I just said, "*yessir*!" and I did that and I got up and walked out.

The word 'surrender' has its etymological origin in the Old French *surrendre*, meaning to submit, yield, or give up oneself to the possession or power of another (Onions, 1998). This common usage implies simply a loss of personal power to another, yet Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) suggest that, within the context of spiritual development, surrendering actually results in an increase in personal power.

> Surrender means releasing the barriers to and letting go of defenses against closeness or union with another, whether this is another person or the Divine. In surrender, we allow ourselves to be authentic. Surrender in this understanding increases power, as, through our openness, we take in more love, more freedom, and ultimately, more God or the Divine. (p. 270)

Consequently, the recognition that one has little control over the events of one's life, and the admission of vulnerability and need for a power greater than self, as previously described, is also essentially a form of surrender.

Lane (1987) emphasizes that surrendering is one activity of the human spirit that, along with inward turning, committing, and struggling, illustrates the level of functioning of a person's spirit. During any critical life event, it is common for an individual to turn inward and assume an introspective, contemplative manner in order to evaluate events to attempt to make sense of the situation. Once an individual accepts that (s)he could not have prevented the traumatic event and acknowledges personal vulnerability, (s)he is able to surrender control to a transcendent power. According to Lane, surrender involves letting go and letting be; it is a recognition of transition, of leaving the past behind and beginning anew. Singh (1998) maintains that "true surrender, and nothing less, is a certain indication that one has recognized, finally, one's own vaster and deeper being, one's own Essential Nature" (p. 155). She adds that psychospiritual transformation cannot occur without surrender because it is the sacrifice of all that is extraneous or inessential to 'self' that permits authenticity and connection with Spirit. Surrender involves the voluntary cessation of resistance to one's situation and, therefore, one's sense of being acted *upon*, thereby creating an openness and receptivity to 'Other'. Surrender to 'Other' provides the opportunity to become complete, to find oneself, and to commune with the Sacred.

Experiencing 'Mystery'

Wondering about and searching for answers to existential questions often led to comforting experiences of mystery that also frequently became turning points for participants. Most of the women described unexplained sensory occurrences that comforted and reassured them while, at the same time, enabling them to move beyond their present circumstances. These mysterious events often manifested during periods of extreme existential anxiety when reassurance was most needed and included auditory, visual, tactile, and even olfactory sensations, as well us unexpected and unexplained 'prophetic' experiences. The significance of such sensory experiences cannot be underestimated as they frequently played a major role in the women's decisions to 'move on' with their lives.

Auditory Experiences. A significant turning point for a number of participants came in the form of an 'inner voice' that was immediately known to be the 'voice of God', as described by Marjorie, Hannah, and Gloria. Marjorie described the turning point in her life in the following account.

> I was cleaning my motor home when she [partner] called to end our eight year relationship. I was so distraught that I just said, "The hell with life, it's not worth living". I closed the garage door, turned on the engine, stuffed some cloths in the exhaust, and climbed into the motor home to die. I just repeated those words: "The hell with life, it's not worth living. To hell with life ' it's over". The second I finished repeating those words, *I heard a loud 'banging' in my mind.* A loud pounding, louder than my heart, and *it* was pounding. It was so real…I was sure there was somebody outside…and I *heard the* words: "What the hell are you trying to do, kill yourself?" Believe me, there was nobody around…I opened the door to look and there was nobody there. Then I just looked up at the sky and said, "Oh God…are You for real?" *I know I heard those words!* And I connected with that and it stopped me. But that whole experience certainly brought about a realization that there was something, *someone* higher than myself, *greater* than myself.

Hannah, too, described the comfort she received in 'hearing' a response to her queries about her father's demise.

> I remember lying in my bed a night or two after [dad] had died and I got really angry with God. I said, 'why now?'…just when I finally have this wonderful relationship with dad…'why now?'" And *I very clearly heard a voice* say to me, "Because five years ago it was too soon". Then I realized that God had given us those last five years as a gift…and that this was the time.

Gloria related her experiences of being 'warned' of impending danger and her subsequent sense of comfort and protection as she learned to 'hear' God.

> My husband and I were planning to drive to the United States. We had a relatively new car, and we had only had it a short time, so there weren't many miles on the tires. One day, I was driving home and it was so clear to me…the word came into my mind…I *heard* it, but not with my ears…it came into my head or brain and it said "tires". When I got home, I said to my husband, "Maybe you should look at the tires". He went out to look and three of the four tires had the steel belts showing, so we could have had major trouble on our trip. But that word…I can still almost 'see' it, but I '*heard*' it…in my head…[but] not with my ears. *I know it was God's voice that I heard.*

On a second occasion, Gloria says she felt "protected" from the certain disaster of fire and recalls the assurance she received while praying about being alone and somewhat fearful after the event.

> I remember clearly, kneeling by the bed, alone, and I said to God: "I'm nervous about a fire after what happened last night" and, again, I *heard* in my head, not with my ears: *"I am with you…sleep in peace".* I can recall that like it was yesterday. I *knew* God was with me and everything was going to be fine. So, I've learned to be much more sensitive and open to hearing what He has to say.

Marjorie also tells of hearing God's voice while driving home after a meeting one evening.

> I saw a bright light coming toward me and I thought it was the headlights of a car. As it got closer, I realized it was not a car. It was like…a huge light…and *I heard God say*: "That light was not the headlights of a car that night when you were in that ditch. *That was my*

> *light. I was the light.*" And then the light passed right through me and got fainter until it disappeared and I was driving home in the dark again.

Marjorie reveals that it is "spiritual experiences such as these" that have allowed her spirit to come alive and have brought about healing in her life.

Not all auditory experiences involved specifically hearing the voice of God. Carrie was similarly comforted by 'hearing' her husband's disembodied voice the night before his funeral while seeking answers from God about her husband's death.

> The night after he [husband] died, when I was getting ready for bed, I thought: "Oh God… What are we going to do? How am I going to manage?….I didn't know what I was going to do. And then, I *heard* my husband reciting the lyrics of a song called '*His Eyes on a Sparrow'*… he was just saying the words to me…the only difference was that he said *my* heart and spirit's *free*. It was very comforting…*my* spirit's free…a sense of freedom.

The auditory sensations experienced by each of these women were described as having been '*heard'* in their heads or minds, rather than with their ears, although they were clearly described as 'voices', not simply as 'thoughts'. These experiences, however, were not frightening to the women who heard them and each described deriving comfort, insight, and reassurance from the unexplainable experiences.

Visual Experiences. Just as the women who unmistakably heard voices of comfort and reassurance, several other participants described the comfort derived from seeing 'visions' of deceased loved ones or of unexpected 'assurances', often brought by 'angels'. Carrie related her experience while in the Intensive Care Unit as she hovered at the brink of death.

> All of a sudden *my brother and my dad appeared to me* – they had died within just six weeks of each other – and they were just standing there *with a presence, like an angel, standing behind them.* I could see them clearly…and I could see the wall right through them. I'd heard people say that when a person is dying they often see their loved ones and I thought, "Oh my God...I've got babies at home…this just absolutely can't happen now". I was afraid until they sat down on the chairs…they sat like they always had when they were visiting, with their legs crossed. As soon as they did that, I knew they were just there to watch over me…and *I felt such a peace…and warmth…* it was really strange. But *this presence, this angel* that was behind them, was so light…almost transparent. There was substance, but *not* substance. He wasn't incandescent…he was whiter…brighter…he was…translucent. You could sort of see through all three of them but this presence was more translucent…brighter…than my dad and brother. *They just gave me so much assurance. I just felt such a peace…and warmth. I felt this great calmness and peace come over me…and an assurance* that things were going to be okay. I never worried after

> that…I knew that I was going to be fine. I knew from then on that God was concerned and that He had given me the strength to recover.

Grace recalls her encounter with an angelic presence at a bookstore reading while she was sitting with a young woman who had recently lost a child.

> I saw an *angel* once, I truly did!…The two of us were sitting talking and this '*Being*' *appeared*…he was right in front of me…and when he looked at me, I felt goosebumps run through my entire body. His eyes were the most beautiful…and he was translucent…a big, beautiful, translucent male with high, rustic cheekbones and blonde hair. He was kind of tanned looking…I can't really even describe it. He looked at me and I felt something go through my body. The two of us glanced at each other…and 'He' was gone…nowhere to be seen…*an angel*. She said: "Did you see that?" and I said "yeah"! It was a very precious and sacred experience…and I know he was a *higher being* of some sort. This really happened! He was kind of translucent…or opaque…and he was…different…the face. You could see in his face the most peaceful, beautiful expression…and I felt such a sense of peace…absolute, positive peace. I think that viewing that *Being* was probably the most spiritual experience I've had. I had goosebumps *and I felt such a sense of peace*. It was just unbelievable. I was so absolutely stunned that I could hardly drive the car back home.

Marjorie, too, describes seeing an angel on one occasion.

> I saw a huge white *angel*…male…big wings and all. He was the most humongous, purest white *angel*…sitting on a rock, right there in front of me. And then I thought of what that nurse had done for me…that was just a really…really spiritual experience.

Visual sensations were not limited to angelic presences but also included visions of previously deceased loved ones and prophetic revelatory visions. Carrie recalls being comforted by a vision of her deceased uncle. The experience started her wondering about God, His nature, and His actions.

> One night…*my uncle appeared to me* dressed in his old plaid work shirt, and he *said*: "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Just live your life, continue to pray, and be faithful to God". It was very startling to me at the time.

After surrendering herself and her confused identity to God, Marjorie was presented with a new identity through a visual experience. Marjorie's vision provided her with a sense of reassurance that she had been delivered and set free from her gender identity crisis and revealed to her a new sense of self-worth.

> Later that day, I had a *vision*…it was just as real as I'm seeing you now. I was back in Nova Scotia as a little child and walking on the beach with my pail and shovel and my britches on. The tide was out and I sat down to dig a hole and make some sand castles.

> The tide started coming in…but it wasn't threatening. I stood up to walk back to the shore and I *heard the Lord* say: *"There's a shell...pick up the shell"*. In the sand I saw a little white shell and I bent down, picked it up, and opened the shell…and inside was a little pearl. And the *Lord said*: *"Marjorie means pearl of great price"*. I closed my little fist and walked a bit further…and when I looked down, the britches were gone and I had on a little white dress. And the little girl in the little white dress walked toward the shore and walked out as a young woman. From then on, I began to grow a true identity. Later on, I checked a name book to see if what I had heard was true…and it said that Marjorie does indeed mean 'pearl of great price'…so it confirmed what I had been given in the *vision.*

Neeld (1997) describes experiencing three successive visions that occurred over mere seconds one afternoon shortly after her husband's death. The visions manifested as slide-show images of three women who were suffering from the loss of loved ones. Neeld states that the visions produced flashes of insight into the mystery of life and the universality and inescapability of suffering as a condition of life. The visions resulted in the sudden acquisition of a deep and abiding wisdom, as well as a sense of comfort in the knowledge she had gained that she was fully participating in life as it had been designed to be.

Tactile Experiences. Unexplained tactile sensations were also commonly experienced by participants and often conveyed comfort and reassurance; frequently, these experiences became turning points for the women in their spiritual journeys. While laying on a couch contemplating God, Hannah recognized that she needed "something bigger than [me]" to help her understand the tragedy of illness that had befallen her niece and nephew.

> I didn't know at the time if God was hearing me, but I had to do something…and I thought maybe praying was *something.* While I was laying there, I thought my husband had come and put his hand on my shoulder because I physically felt a hand on my back, but when I turned, nobody was there. I felt…*I knew that was God. God's hand was on my shoulder*. I *knew* with certainty when I felt His hand on my back that God had heard me. I think that was sort of a *turning point* for me as far as believing…that was impossible to deny.

About a month after Carrie's brother-in-law died, she stated that she had been sleeping, when:

> All of a sudden, *I felt someone take my hand.* I rolled over and saw *it was my brother-in-law who had died two years earlier*, and he said: "Our family will be reunited within two years". That's all he said…and then he was gone. It was only a little over a month later that my husband died…so in a sense, I had been prepared for that…and we had been given twelve good years after my husband's angioplasty.

Similar experiences were described by both Hannah and Grace who stated they had felt the spirits of their loved ones leave their bodies at the moment of death. Grace stated:

> When he [husband] died, he died in my arms…and that was an absolutely spiritual experience. In those hours immediately before his death, I felt almost as though I was out of my body and in a different consciousness. Time seemed to go on and on because he was labouring to breathe…and yet it wasn't very long. *I felt it when he left his body…*and I just held him real tight. At the very end, I was just holding him and his head kind of fell back and…that's when *I felt his spirit leave his body.* I felt kind of 'cold chills'…just kind of cool…cold, like when you get goosebumps…*just kind of a cool breeze across my skin.*

Being present at her mother's death definitely became a turning point for Hannah: She describes feeling her mother's spirit leave her body at the precise moment of death.

> I knew my mother was going to die this particular night…I just knew it was going to be that night. So I called the family and everyone came and we were all standing around her bed when she passed away – the family, the nurse, and a priest. Earlier that evening, the nurses had put a bowl of ice and fan in the room to keep mom cool because her temperature was so high. We were just standing around her bed when she died and…*I felt her leave. I felt her spirit leave her body* and I knew that she was gone. I told the nurse and she wasn't so sure but I told her *I felt mom's spirit leave.* At the moment her spirit left, I had asked the nurse to turn off the fan. The priest who was there in the room knew exactly what I had felt and he said to me, "That's not the fan". And yet, *I felt a wind…*there was a physical wind in the room that I had felt. Then the priest shared with me that, in Latin, wind and spirit come from the same word…and I felt that. I knew at that very moment that I would never look at God in a superficial way again. I believed…I knew that that wind was her spirit… mom's spirit…exiting the room. But more specifically, *I felt the presence of God* in that room. That wind was God's spirit coming to escort my mom to heaven…and I realized that this spiritual *Being* who I had had a very superficial relationship with was very, very real… and I couldn't pretend anymore. That was a very spiritual experience for me…and it was definitely a *turning point* in my life. I knew that I could not have a brush with God that was that personal and that close and that real and walk away unchanged. I walked away from that deathbed a changed person. *I had touched God…or God had touched me.*

Bolen (1996), too, recalls *knowing* the moment her father's soul had left his body and states, "I saw his eyes open wide, and his face light up with joy…One moment, he was there, the next instant, he was gone. Only an empty body remained; his soul had left. His body was warm…but *he* – his soul – wasn't there anymore" (p. 20). Gloria recalls sensing a presence with her while practicing on the organ in church one evening.

> I was in the church practicing, alone, when I *sensed this presence*, the *presence of the Lord*, sitting right beside me. I could *feel* Him right there and, all of a sudden, I began to play the most beautiful music. I didn't know *what* it was. I had *never heard anything like it before* and my hands were just moving all over the keyboard…*but I didn't know the music…*I was just playing. It was so exciting…and it made me really begin to think about God.

Sensations of touch may be particularly comforting because of their associations with intimacy, compassion, and caring. In daily human life, touch often reflects the closeness of a relationship and is frequently employed to express genuine compassion and concern. Touch has also long been associated with healing in virtually all cultures and is an integral part of the healing professions (Bolen, 1996; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Carson, 1989; Neuberger, 1998; Taylor, 2002). Consequently, it is not surprising that tactile sensations brought feelings of comfort and reassurance to those experiencing them.

Olfactory Experiences

Although none of the participants in this investigation experienced olfactory sensations, Neeld (1997) describes such experiences of mystery as common to individuals who are grieving. She relates the experience of a young widow she interviewed.

> I was riding in a taxi…going home from the hospital to get burial clothes. Suddenly the taxi was filled – literally *filled – with the smell of violets*. I looked out of the taxi window to see who might be carrying flowers or to locate a flower stall. But there was no sign of flowers anywhere on the street. [I said to the driver], "What a beautiful smell. Where are the flowers?" The driver looked started. "I was about to ask you what perfume you're wearing," he responded. Neither of us could come up with an explanation for the sudden smell of violets. It was one of those weird, unexplainable occurrences. In some strange way, though, that *mystery* was *comforting* to me. I was uplifted by the smell of those violets. I felt as though I'd been touched by [husband] or the hand of God. (p. 35)

Unexplained Prophetic Experiences

Several participants recounted experiences of reading scripture that provided messages of reassurance during difficult periods, provided comfort, and caused them to re-evaluate their experiences as they searched for some meaning. For example, Carrie recalls her experience of sitting in an Intensive Care waiting room for her husband to return after he had an angioplasty.

> While I was waiting for him to return, I was sitting thinking that the kids were only three and five years old and wondering how we were ever going to manage. I picked up a blue Gideon's bible and opened it up and this *scripture just jumped right out at me*. To paraphrase, the passage read something to the effect of: "Don't worry, I will not leave you as orphans at this time". *I knew then that he would come through it just fine*…at least for then. I knew we had been given a reprieve, but I also knew it was not for an indefinite time either…we had another twelve good years after that before he died.

June described a similar experience that she referred to as a 'prophecy' delivered by a close young friend who had earlier dated June's son.

> I know this may sound…kind of 'kooky' to some people, but this is really the truth. I received a phone call from [friend] one night and she said: "I'm a bit hesitant to tell you this, June, but *God has told me that I am to give you this scripture*. I have not opened the bible but I dare not disobey. I don't know what's going on in your life right now, but God wants you to read Deuteronomy 28: 1-14"…so I went and read it right away…and it was all about the blessings of obedience. Then, one day [just before the surgery], it was revealed to me that the bible says that if you're sick, you should go to the elders of the church and have them lay hands on you, pray over you, and anoint you with oil…and I remembered the scripture about obedience and decided that I must obey…so I did do it [Afterwards] what began to come over me was this…this peace, this *incredible peace*…and this *feeling of well-being* and a *sense of ableness to go on*. When I prayed for healing that day, I thought it would be the healing of the cancer, but what it turned out to be was a *healing of June*…and her *soul*…and all of her *fears*…and God became very much more *real* to me.

Gloria, too, described feeling comforted by messages of affirmation and assurance while reading her bible and listening to a religious broadcasting station.

> It seemed to me that every time I read anything in scripture, it was providing me with *assurances* that I would be 'OK', that God was looking after me and I had nothing to fear… and every time I turned on the radio, I was getting the *same type of message*. When I went to church, it was the same thing…very positive, clear messages…and this happened every day for about a month…and I had no fear…and my faith began to really grow.

Later on, Gloria described experiencing the Spirit of God in another unexpected manner.

> That evening, I knelt by my bed to pray and, all of a sudden, with absolutely no warning, *I started to speak in another language…one that I was not familiar with* and I remember feeling very awed. I was not afraid…I was really quite excited because it just 'happened'. I felt absolute joy and amazement and I just kept thinking, "it's real…it's really real!" It certainly just reinforced my faith.

Neeld (1997) emphasizes that almost everyone who experiences a major loss experiences some kind of unexplained sensory phenomenon and states that these mysterious events must be respected. She states that most people are embarrassed to discuss their experiences with others for fear that others will consider them 'crazy' and adds:

> We don't have to be able to explain a phenomenon in order to take comfort from it or to marvel at it. Perhaps the most important thing about experiencing such occurrences is the truth they put before us: that we do not know everything. That life contains mysteries, and

> that it is possible to be greatly enriched and even strengthened by these mysteries and moments of grace. (p. 43)

Although there are many theories that have been advanced to explain such occurrences by adherents of various disciplines, Neeld suggests that, especially during periods of mourning, it is unnecessary to attempt to understand mysterious occurrences; it is sufficient merely to acknowledge them, reflect on them, and derive comfort from them because such experiences often precipitate and enhance the healing process. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) maintain that when individuals encounter the unexplainable they may be strengthened and sustained through their unknowing by embracing the mystery. Many mysterious events defy explanation, yet pondering their meaning leads to an exploration of the deepest existential concerns and a search for the ultimate meaning of life. Consequently, according to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson, "Mystery may be understood as Truth that we cannot yet understand" (p. 52).

Making the 'Turn': A Matter of Choice

For all of the participants the recognition of personal vulnerability led to a realization that they needed a power beyond themselves to cope with life. Recognizing the 'possibility of 'Other'' resulted in an 'awakening' of spirit, the 'surrendering' of control, and the 'experiencing of mystery'. The insights gained from these experiences became the turning points for these women and culminated in the need to make a decision, either to 'move beyond' their present circumstances or to remain 'stuck' in their suffering, mired in a state of chaos, disorganization, dissilience, and disconnection, heading toward 'self' dis-integration. Numerous authors have stressed the significance of making such a decision and many have referred to the choice confronting suffering individuals as a 'turning point' (Bolen, 1996; Brehony, 1996, 2000; Buckman, 1996; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Byock, 1997; Frankl, 1984; Longaker, 1997; McCrone, 1991; Neeld, 1997; Pearson, 1994; Prend, 1997; Rando, 1984, 1991; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). Neeld (1997) states that movement from the highly disorganized state of being that is the aftermath of loss can only be accomplished through choice;

one must consciously decide that one *will* continue to exist and develop a new, although different, life after the traumatic loss. She refers to such an assertion as the 'turn', a point that marks the beginning of the regenerative process.

In order to more fully understand the significance of personal choice as an element of transcendence and spiritual transformation in the wake of trauma or existential crisis, it is useful to consider the origin and implied meaning of the word 'crisis' itself. The etymological derivation of 'crisis' is found in the Greek *krinen* meaning 'to decide'. As such, crisis becomes a juncture or turning point; it is a crossroad at the center of two radically different 'paths' of response to trauma. McCrone (1991) states that:

> In Chinese two characters are used to write the word crisis; one is the character for danger, and the other is the character for opportunity. As a danger, crisis threatens to overwhelm the individual; as an opportunity, it prompts development of new coping skills. An important aspect of the crisis period is that it is a time of increased vulnerability that can produce increased growth in the individual. (p. 389)

The decision an individual makes at this point is dependent upon his or her attitude and will determine the path, process, and progress of recovery and spiritual transformation.

Bolen (1996) maintains that a turning point is reached when one develops a belief that change is possible and decides to take action to bring about such change. She further asserts that "if suffering or dying is the task, doing it well or poorly is a choice" (p. 35). The turning point is reached at the soul level and "has to do with discovering reasons to live, a *will* that is determined to do so, faith that it is possible, and wise *choices* about what to do" (p. 85). Bowlby (as cited in Neeld, 1997) emphasizes that reaching a turning point does not happen automatically, but is a *cognitive act*; it is a *decision*, a commitment to making long-term adjustments by changing one's perspective and attitude. Amanda admitted that she had to make a decision to change her attitude about some unpleasant tasks and stated that "the Lord has really taught [me] something about attitude" and stated that:

> Life is too short to do anything without a positive attitude. If my initial response to anything is not good, I pray that God will help me change my attitude because I'm not willing to do anything without the right attitude. I won't attempt anything with a poor attitude because I don't think God has any use for that.

Longaker (1997) describes the decision she and her husband made to face his impending death from acute leukemia as a 'gift', rather than a tragedy, so that they could enjoy the remainder of their life together and begin to really appreciate life.

> We committed ourselves that day to use whatever experiences we would have in the best possible way, as a catalyst for our own growth. And this more positive and empowering view of death helped bring a richness and courage to the ensuing months that wouldn't have been possible otherwise. (p. 4)

Frankl (1984) suggests that the ultimate freedom is one's ability to choose one's attitude toward suffering, and Young-Eisendrath (1996) contends that "we create heaven or hell through our own responses" (p. 23) to adversity based on the meaning ascribed to unavoidable traumatic events. She adds:

> There are times when we must die to an old identity if we want to survive wholly. If there is a catastrophe in adulthood...we have to give up our old expectations...We can move forward by recognizing that the past is behind us, and try to find a new sense of self. Or we can stay stuck in ruminating over past events and try to recapture a self that is no longer as useful as it was. (p. 102)

Although crisis events cannot be avoided, they can provide opportunities for focusing the mind and finding new directions in life, according to Longaker (1997). While choosing a positive attitude may not immediately relieve suffering, it will, over time, "generate[s] the causes and conditions for our future happiness" (p. 59). Burkardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that individuals who embrace the mystery that surrounds suffering are often more able to connect with their inner resources than those who resist suffering, thereby ameliorating their experiences of loss. Consequently, it is evident that, once the turning point has been reached, individuals must not only make a conscious *choice* to move on but must *act* on their decisions. As Neeld (1997) indicates, 'self'-integration is a function of the personal decisions that individuals make at particular junctures in the suffering process. Life thus becomes meaningful only through the context of choice (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Temporal Perceptions in Suffering and Dissilience

Time bears special mention in the phase of dissilience and disconnection because it forms the background of suffering and grief associated with loss. Several participants described temporal distortions during which they were unable to gauge the passage of time accurately. Carrie remembers being only vaguely aware of time while in the ICU when she experienced the comforting presence of deceased family members during a near death experience. She recalls merely that they stayed "however long it took for the units of platelets to be finished", although she was not aware of how much time actually passed. Gloria stated that, during the experience she described as a 'spiritual attack', she lost all track of time; the episode of "terror" began just after eight in the morning and persisted until well after midnight. Gloria describes being aware only of "snippets" of time and recalls being otherwise completely unaware of the passage of time.

> I have no idea how long that lasted…whether it lasted a few minutes or a long time, I really don't know…at least, I couldn't tell at the time. I know I 'came out of it' around twelve-thirty but I don't know what happened during those hours. *Time simply disappeared*…all I remember are the faces and the feeling of absolute terror…and I was told that lasted until well after midnight.

Grace described the final hours she was able to spend with her husband in the ICU, knowing his death was imminent.

> Those last few hours before his death, I felt almost as if I was out of my body…in a different consciousness. I was on a different consciousness level that *seemed like it went on and on and on*…[especially] because he was labouring to breathe. And yet, it wasn't *really* a very long time…but it seemed a very long, long arduous time.

Shuman (1996) maintains that, when individuals suffer, their experience of time becomes distorted, "out of joint" (p. 47) because of the unpredictability that surfaces when their lifeworlds are suddenly disrupted; the present often seems choppy and disjointed or long and drawn out" (p.

64). He further suggests that individuals give little thought to time in daily life, except when it frustrates or facilitates given activities; nevertheless, when suffering strikes, time stretches, slows to a crawl, as one's time frame is "wrenched out of shape" (p. 53). In her work with terminally ill individuals, De Hennezel (1997) maintains that she has observed a noticeable "suspension of time" in those facing proximal death (p. 100) and suggests that, perhaps during this time, individuals may be "able to experience eternal time within everyday time" (p. 100) because they are more aware of themselves and others. While awaiting her husband's return from cardiac by-pass surgery, Carrie states she "*waited for an eternity*", and during the period of time that Joanne was in agony over the disappearance of her daughter, she says she was only able to 'get by' on a "day to day" basis, during which her perception of time passing was altered.

> I remember it was spring and I had an awareness of it getting light and then dark, but *time just 'was'* and I was otherwise *unaware of its passage*. I knew when it was time to go to bed by the changing of the light, but when I did try to sleep, my thoughts would keep me awake. I couldn't sleep until I got so tired that I 'died' practically. *I didn't know what time of day it was...or even what day of the week it was.* I was just so wrapped up in myself and my hurt that I never really thought about time going by. I remember that, some months later, I realized the leaves were changing colour and *I knew the summer had already passed without my having any awareness of it. I didn't know where the months had gone.*

Pearson (1994) points out that when "dealing day and night with an impending event which will shatter one's private world, everything else becomes relatively unimportant and may start to become crashingly trivial" (p. 45) causing one to develop a kind of tunnel vision, wherein one's sense of time and perception changes. Days may seem to creep by when suffering is present. Lief (2001), a pastoral counselor, maintains that, when faced with life-threatening situations, individuals frequently report a perception of slowed time that permits them to discover a means for survival. According to Neeld (1997), research on bereavement conducted by the Institute of Medicine suggests that:

> During this time of stress our brains secrete special neurohormones that allow us to register or recognize things happening around us in a detached, slow-motion way. It may be that some part of us closes down since what has happened to us is so overwhelming. (p. 27)

Rando (1984) suggests that, particularly when faced with extreme existential stress or life-threatening illness, individuals often develop an "altered sense of time" and face the future on a "day to day basis" (p. 255), thereby decreasing anxiety and permitting hope to develop. Shuman (1996) agrees and adds that efforts to live day by day can serve as a defense against continued suffering or act as a coping mechanism to temporarily alleviate suffering. Such a temporal alteration provides a mental refuge and facilitates necessary planning and survival activities.

It is apparent from the participants' accounts and the literature that time becomes a distorted reality when one is suffering. Time may seemingly cease or slow to a crawl; its passage is marked, not in minutes but by changes in light and dark, by memories and events, by anticipated loss and change, by wistfulness and longing…lost futures and remembered pasts. Time warps, becomes eternity, yet passes in the blink of an eye. Dreams of tomorrow evaporate in the tears of the present and the hauntingly reminiscent promises of yesterday.

Kronos and Kairos. Perhaps the distortions in time experienced by participants and individuals who are suffering can be understood if one is able to reflect on two strikingly different dimensions of time. Both Bolen (1996) and Neeld (1997) differentiate these two temporal dimensions in terms of the Greek concepts of *kronos* and *kairos*. The dimension of time known as *kronos* refers to linear, measured time and is the most commonly understood usage of the term 'time'. *Kronos* is measured by clocks and calendars, and it is from kronos that words such as chronometer and chronological are derived. *Kronos* time is experienced as continual forward movement from past to present to future, as metronomic movement, precisely measured and unchanging in its metre. The alternate dimension of time, known as *kairos*, refers to *perceived* time, time experienced when one is fully engaged in the present moment. "Time takes on a different quality, and we often lose track of it" states Bolen (1996, p. 86); such perceptions are a function of *participation* and complete absorption in the present and necessitate the 'letting go' of everything extraneous.

The designation of alternate temporal dimensions by these authors suggests that experiences of *kairos* time, as well as *kronos* time, are essential to the ability to transcend one's traumatic existential crisis. In *kairos* time, minutes may seemingly crawl by as if hours, or even stand still, or hours may disappear as fleeting moments. In paying attention only to the present, Neeld (1997) suggests that individuals are "drawn *inside* the movement of [their] own story" (p. 280) [emphasis in original] and, thereby, acquire personal depth. She further asserts that *kronos* time is valuable in suffering only in that it allows individuals to experience *kairos* time, which depends on the choices they make and that allow them to move beyond their circumstances.

A final note about time in suffering. Although it is a commonly understood maxim of contemporary society that 'time heals all', both Rando (1984, 1991) and Neeld (1997) emphasize that time is therapeutic *only* once a decision has been made to deal with the loss and to actively undertake to engage in the process of mourning. Movement through and transcendence of suffering is more than a function of the passage of time; it is dependent also upon choices that individuals make or fail to make that facilitate their commitment to an uncertain future, compel forward movement, and promote reintegration into their lifeworlds. The importance of both *kronos* and *kairos* time in the process of healing cannot be underestimated since it "allow[s] you to put things in perspective, adapt to change, and process the feelings" attendant to grief (Rando, 1991, p. 73). Time, in both its dimensions, as the background for spiritual transformation was described as a "process" or "journey" by virtually all participants and will be more fully discussed in a following section.

Personal Experience of Dis-Integration

As I reflected on the similarities and differences between the participants' life stories, I began to reflect on my own recent experience and discovered that I had been plagued with many of the same responses, indeed, that I too had some sense of suffering, albeit of a lesser intensity than these women. Consequently, I have included my personal experience to demonstrate the similarity of my own experience to that of the women in this investigation and as a further example of the various themes. Although my personal experience has been, admittedly, relatively minor in comparison to these women's experiences, I came to realize that my struggling was relevant for inclusion in this study and had heightened my sensitivity toward suffering. For the past two years, I shared with my husband the uncomfortable and protracted legal wrangling inherent in a defamation lawsuit. The initial shock and attendant chaos of media scrutiny and telephone calls, the anger over perceived injustice, the fear generated by uncertainty, the depression born of an oppressive sense of victimization, and the sense of abandonment and isolation were all hallmarks of the traumatic crisis that had invaded our lives. The intrusion of this event into my generally 'stable' life pervaded all aspects of my 'being' and turned my world, temporarily, upside down.

Physically, I was tired yet unable to sleep…at night I would lay awake and reflect on the effect this experience was having on someone I loved so very much and on our life together. When I could sleep, I would often wake with a start thinking I had stopped breathing and, then, my pulse would race – I could 'feel' the adrenaline in my system in my rapid breathing and pulse, in the cold damp sweat on my palms and forehead, and in the tension and tremors in my muscles. I had generalized feelings of anticipation and dread that prevented any return to the safety of sleep and the temporary escape from existence. Other times, I would just lay there, awake. At times, I felt that my chest was constricting and I couldn't breathe…I was choking, suffocating. My head would pound with each heartbeat and I often had palpitations, all clear symptoms to me that my blood pressure was elevated. When I was up, I could think of little else and would find myself hyperventilating and tremulous. I developed frequent, unexplained stomach aches and esophageal spasms. I was often nauseous and felt weak and lightheaded, yet I sometimes ate anyway, just for comfort…and in the hope I would develop some energy. I gained more weight and felt even worse about myself. I tried going for walks with my dogs but I would get frustrated because I just didn't have enough energy to enjoy even walking, so leaving the house become a real chore. I was exhausted. I saw my doctor and began taking medication for depression so I could get some rest. My body was betraying me and I could not get away from it…sometimes I wanted to die in my sleep so that it would all be over and I wouldn't have to face it any longer.

Mentally, I replayed the situation repeatedly in my head and imagined various possible endings while indulging in dreams of "if only…". I found it difficult to concentrate on anything. I couldn't think. Work became difficult and I worried about interactions with colleagues and students. What did they think? Had they chosen 'sides'? Often, during meetings my mind would wander…I was easily distracted. I tried reading but I couldn't remember what I had read. I watched television to try and escape from my feelings for a while, but I could never follow the story because my mind just kept wandering. I wanted to write, but I couldn't focus. I waited with dread, and yet also with a strange sense of anticipation, the arrival of the daily newspaper. Articles appeared on an almost daily basis about 'the lawsuit'. At times I would read them with a sense of pride in the position my husband had taken and the integrity with which he handled the pressure. Other times I would be frustrated and angry and feel 'sick to my stomach' over an editorial. I wanted to write the newspaper and tell the world that this was unfair and a wrongful characterization. And I was angry and afraid.

I was afraid for my husband because, although he was the central actor in this play, I was there, too…but who was "I" in all this? This wasn't about "me", but it did involve me…I felt guilty for thinking about myself, but how could I possibly understand the depths of my husband's feelings?…I was too 'self' absorbed. I was afraid of bankruptcy and of losing our home. I was afraid of scorn…or ridicule. I was afraid that, if we couldn't share this experience and be strong together, our relationship would be damaged. I was afraid that my husband was feeling these same feelings. I was afraid that we might lose some friends. I was afraid I would just 'lose it completely' and go 'crazy'. I was afraid I might let my husband and family down. I was angry, so very angry, that we had to go through this experience at all – it didn't seem fair that, just as our life seemed to be going 'great', this should happen. I felt very betrayed that someone held in high regard by many others would deliberately inflict this pain on another so unnecessarily. I was angry at God for allowing this to happen. And, yet, I was afraid, too, that I would 'handle it' poorly and let God down…or that God, on whom I had always relied, would somehow let me down. I believed that God would be with us and guide us, yet, at times, fear would overwhelm me and I would be plagued with doubts. I learned about despair and was deeply saddened by the realization that life, indeed, was not fair. I was depressed over how long it was taking to resolve this whole thing. I moved easily between the apparent calm of assurance, actually a controlled mask of apathy and depression, to the fury and rage of injustice in mere moments. I had difficulty with the sudden vacillations in my emotions and I sometimes just sat and cried.

Socially, I felt myself withdrawing into a private cocoon – I didn't have the energy to engage in the seemingly pointless, unimportant banter of everyday life that is so necessary to preserving relationships. Everything else seemed trivial, yet this was not something I wanted to share with many. I knew I was overextended in professional and voluntary activities for my current level of preoccupation and lack of energy, yet I felt compelled to meet my obligations and felt myself 'crashing'. I was often distracted by my own inner thoughts and, although I desperately wanted to maintain my friendships, I needed time to be alone and could not bring myself to voluntarily 'have coffee' or engage in idle chit-chat…I had *serious* things to consider. Work was difficult because some of my colleagues attempted to avoid mentioning the topic, while others provided superficial reassurances that "everything [will] work out". I tried to hide my feelings so 'this whole issue' would not affect my work…I presented a façade to the world and pretended I didn't care, but I know the stress showed through to those to really 'knew me' well. Some people we had always thought of as friends stopped calling, yet others we had never counted among our friends called to provide support and were genuinely concerned. At times, I didn't want to begin any new activities because I might have to give my name…and how would I be received then? Other times, I was defiant…let them say something! I was ready to defend my honour and the integrity, ideals, and compassion of my quixotic husband! I laughed less and cried more…and I always felt such relief and gratitude when a true friend would ask me how "I" was doing and actually listen to my answer and still give me 'space' when I needed time alone.

Spiritually, I felt alone, isolated from my friends, yet I wanted to be left alone most of the time. I knew who my 'true' friends were but I didn't know about acquaintances. Who could I trust? I didn't want to broach the subject and make anyone uncomfortable, but I didn't want to avoid the topic and be seen as a coward, either, so most of the time it was easier just to avoid people. I felt really sad and very alone sometimes. I was in my own little chrysalis and I, too, knew that there had to be some *sense*…some *meaning* in all of this. Some days, I just wanted to cry…and I did…and sometimes, even crying took too much energy. I couldn't laugh…or even smile most of the time. I was anxious about my husband but I didn't want him to know that I was hurting because I knew that he was concerned for my health, both physical and mental, as I was for his. I couldn't share my fears with him because he had so much on his mind already and I knew it was much worse for him than it was for me. I felt alienated from God for a while, even though I knew that was my fault. Initially, I found it difficult to pray or to put my heart into worship when we went to church. I wanted to be steadfast in my faith and graceful in response but most often my humanity got in the way. I felt so isolated. I wanted answers and they weren't forthcoming. Some days, I was so tired, worn out, and empty – I just felt like I wanted to be wrapped in cotton wool and put on the shelf for a while so I didn't have to deal with anybody or anything. I prayed that God would remain with me and give me strength…that He would see me through this dark night of my soul. This experience, for someone seldom before really 'tested', created a crisis and chaos that was so pervasive I didn't know if I could endure it. If a 'minor' crisis could cause such extreme distress, how much more was it magnified in the experiences of these women? How could they possibly have endured, and overcome, such turmoil?

As I mused upon the experiences of the research participants, I found myself, once again, considering the similarities between my own experience and theirs. As the lawsuit unfolded, I found myself questioning my beliefs about suffering and growth and the place of God in my world. I recalled a book I had seen: *"Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?"* Why did they, I wondered? Why would God let this happen? Would He provide the strength, the courage, the resolve, and the comfort I knew we would need? I questioned whether I had the fortitude to endure the trial, however long it might last. Would we be vindicated? I wondered about the purpose of trying to lead a moral life…was it worth it? Wouldn't it be easier to retaliate?…at least there might be some satisfaction in that…but then, how would I assuage my conscience? It just wasn't right…and it wasn't fair. I wondered if other people could see the 'truth' through all of this. I thought about politics and the power of money. How could anyone justify injuring another simply to advance his or her cause? What was the point of our attempting to serve the community, if our entire life could be thrown into turmoil or destroyed with one simple statement by a detractor? I was deeply wounded and yet I knew that my husband's wounds were far greater and very unjust. How could I support him? Would his faith survive intact? Would his self-esteem survive…would he survive? Did he share the same questions…the same feelings…the same misgivings? I had questions…oh so many questions about why this had happened and what would be the outcome. Why now…just as the future seemed 'rosy'? What was the reason for this interruption in our lives? There *must* be some purpose…some meaning to this misery. I had many questions but there didn't seem to be any answers.

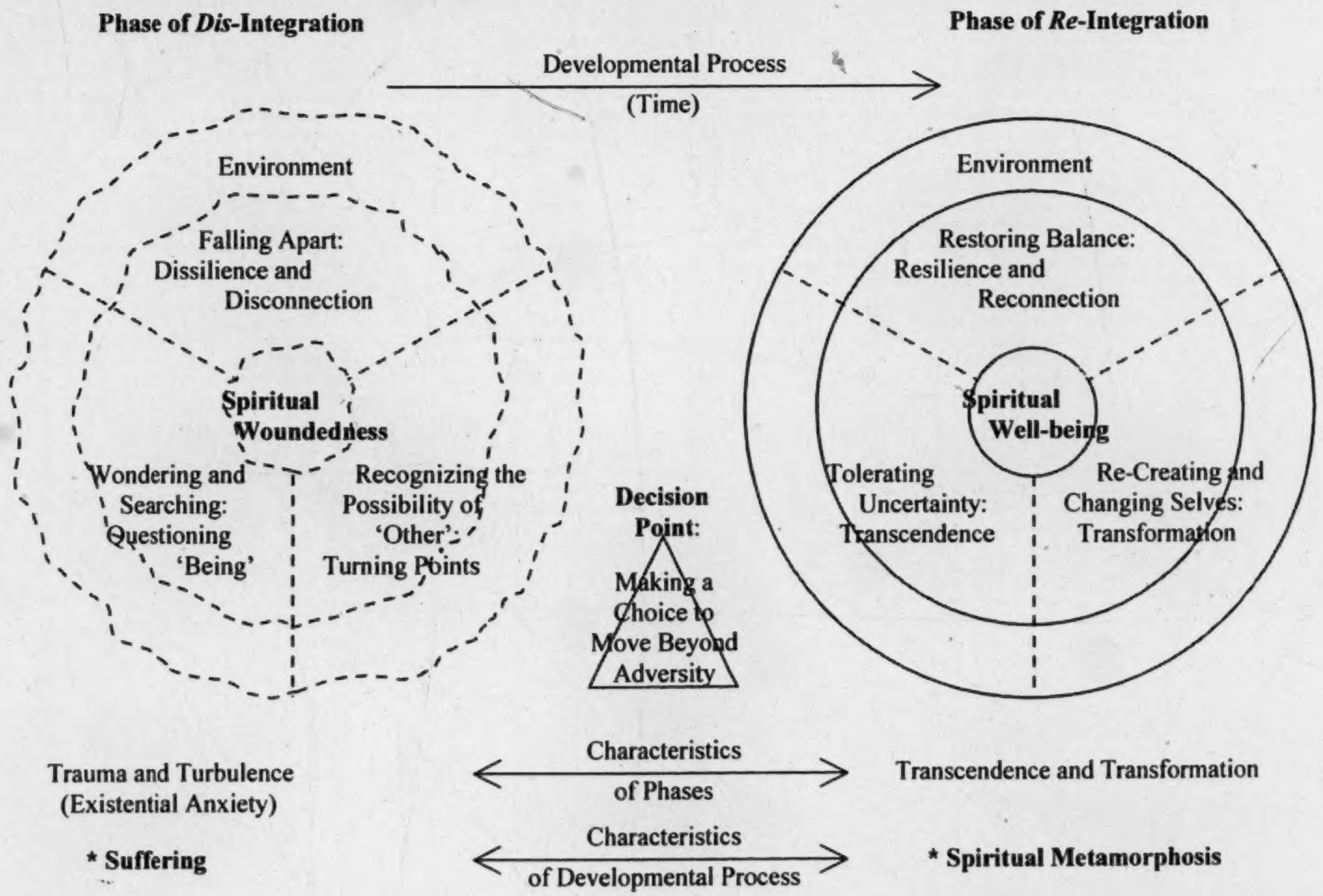
Despite my intensive contemplation of the experience and my ceaseless questioning, I realized there were no answers forthcoming and I felt very exposed…vulnerable. I realized that I had little real control over my life and needed some authority greater than myself, God, to help me get beyond this crisis. Recognizing my vulnerability in the face of unpredictable random traumatic events allowed me to see the possibility of 'something beyond' myself and my present situation and I was able to surrender my experience to my source of transcendent power…God. As I continued to seek answers through prayer, discussed my concerns with my husband, and asked the counsel of a few intimate friends, I came to a moment of clarity and insight. I realized that, regardless of the outcome, together we could make it through this troubled period. As long as we pulled together, trusted in our faith, and maintained our integrity in response to this crisis situation, we could survive, perhaps even thrive. I knew I had to make a choice. I could choose to leave the doubts and concerns behind and confidently move on with life or I could choose to engage in self-pity and let this rule my life, ruin my health, and ruin my relationships. The time had come to make a decision. The choice was clear. I decided it was time to 'get on with life' and to 'move beyond' this event!

Phase of *Re*-Integration (Metamorphosis)

The second phase of spiritual metamorphoses illustrated in the conceptual model, that of *Re*-Integration, is characterized by connectedness, transcendence, and transformation. This phase is, by definition, integrative and constituted by three distinct yet overlapping themes, including *'Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection'*, *'Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence'*, and '*Recreating and Changing Self: Transformation'*. The term 'integration' has its etymological origin in the Latin *integer*, meaning intact, and in the late Latin *integralis*, meaning to bring together or incorporate (parts) into a whole, or to restore to unity (Onions, 1998; Urdang, 1980). Each participant in this study experienced personal 'self' *dis*-integration when her life metaphorically 'fell into pieces'; however, once a decision was made to 'move beyond', each woman was then faced with the challenge of *re*-integration.

Metamorphosis was chosen as the predominant characteristic of the *Re*-Integrative phase because it symbolizes the complete transformation of self described by each of the women. *Metamorphosis* is originally a Greek word that means to change the form or nature of some structure or substance, to transform, to undergo or be capable of undergoing a change or successive changes of form, and a process by which an animal is adapted to a new or special environment or way of living (Urdang, 1980). Adaptation and transformation are evident through the accounts of progressive change experienced by each participant as she struggled with crisis and, subsequently, embraced an alternative future in the aftermath of loss.

Metamorphosis: Spiritual Transformation as Response to Suffering and Trauma


Phase of *Dis*-Integration
Phase of *Re*-Integration
Developmental Process
(Time)
Environment
Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection
Spiritual Woundedness
Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'
Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points
Decision Point:
Making a Choice to Move Beyond Adversity
Environment
Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection
Spiritual Well-being
Tolerating Uncertainty: Transcendence
Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation
Trauma and Turbulence (Existential Anxiety)
Characteristics of Phases
Transcendence and Transformation
* Suffering
Characteristics of Developmental Process
* Spiritual Metamorphosis

Theme Four: Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection

> *Nothing in nature is isolated. Nothing is without reference to something else. Nothing achieves meaning apart from that which neighbors it.*
>
> *Goethe*

The fourth theme, *'Restoring Balance: Resiliency and Reconnection'* was described by participants in restorative and regenerative terms that demonstrated the essential nature of spiritual transformation. As each woman reached a turning point and made a decision to move forward, she began to reach out and reconnect to her lifeworld through a variety of renewed or new relationships. The types of connections described by the participants fell into four discrete categories and affirmed the types of relationships identified from a review of the literature related to spirituality. Categories of relationships included connections to God (however defined), others, self, and nature. The ability to transcend their traumatic circumstances by reconnecting with and/or redesigning their former lifeworlds demonstrates the remarkable resiliency of the women in this investigation and, as such, was chosen as one of the descriptors for this theme.

The word 'resilience' derives from the French or Latin *resilire* meaning to leap together, spring back, rebound, or return to the original form or position (Onions, 1998; Urdang, 1980). Webster (1989) defines resilience as "the ability to recover readily from illness, depression, adversity, or the like; buoyancy" (p. 1220); while Pearson and Trumble (1996) define resilience as "recoiling, springing back, [or] resuming [its] original shape after bending, stretching, compression, etc." (p. 1226). Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) describe resiliency as the ability to "bounce back" (p. 16) after adversity or confrontation with some existential challenge and maintain that, although an innate characteristic in some individuals, resilience can, alternatively, be either developed or destroyed as a function of one's response to life experiences. Brehony (2000) refers to resiliency as the ability to spring back from loss or defeat and stresses the need for individuals to 'let go' of painful events so that they will be alert enough to discover meaning, develop wisdom, and avoid becoming overwhelmed and defeated by adversity.

Cognitive and behavioural coping skills, as well as the recruitment of social support, are considered constituent components of resilience that must be acquired over time as part of a developmental process, according to Lazarus and Folkman (as cited in Fine, 1991). Young-Eisendrath (1996) suggests that resilience appears to be associated with particular personality traits, including empathy, humour, flexibility, creativity, and wisdom. To these, Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) add authenticity, acceptance of responsibility, confidence, adaptability, social and environmental responsiveness, a capacity for risk-taking, and religious beliefs. Green (as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) defines resilience as a person's ability to pursue "achievable ventures" (p. 50) while accepting one's personal weaknesses and limitations. In an investigation of resiliency in healthy adults who had suffered extensively during childhood, researchers Wolin and Wolin identified seven distinctive character traits of resilient individuals (Brehoney, 2000). These traits included the gradual development of insight and wisdom (from the contemplation of searching existential questions), the capacity to establish enduring intimate relationships, the initiative to structure one's personal environment, an independence of mind, the use of humour and creativity to reduce tension and to assist one to redesign one's life, a strong morality and willingness to defend one's values, and an overall general resiliency that encompasses persistence and flexibility.

In another study of resilience in older women, Wagnild and Young (1990) described five themes that were evident throughout the women's stories and demonstrated personal resiliency. These themes included a balanced perspective of life that reflected the influence of both positive and negative life experiences, perseverance in the face of adversity, self-reliance and confidence in one's ability to manage all aspects of one's personal life, a recognition that there is meaning and purpose in life, and the realization that every human being has a unique life path and must face certain challenges alone. The women described having both internal and external sources of strength for coping. A positive attitude, belief in themselves and in their abilities, a sense of humour, great determination, and a belief in God were their primary sources of inner strength.

Connections with others and creative, meaningful activities comprised their external resources during difficult life adjustments. Over time, and with considerable effort, adversity was fully integrated into these women's life paths and led to a restoration of balance and a continued sense of meaning and purpose in life. Consequently, resilience was viewed as a defining characteristic of the "indomitable human spirit" (p. 252), one that permitted adjustment and adaptation after significant personal loss.

Kadner (1989) describes resiliency as "the ability to regain psychosocial equilibrium after a brief fragmentation in response to severe stress" (p. 24) and maintains that ego strength, social intimacy, and resourcefulness are constitutive characteristics of resilient individuals. Ego strength is a genetic predisposition towards maintaining a dynamic and realistic balance in the areas of one's personal needs and desires. Social intimacy is at the heart of social support and denotes one's ability to enter into close, confiding relationships with others. Resourcefulness is described as the ability to regulate one's cognitive responses to adverse events. Defined in this manner, resilience reflects both inherent and developmental personality traits. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999), also, maintain that resiliency requires more than an ability merely to cope with adversity; one must also demonstrate *flexibility* in adapting to traumatic events while still meeting the functional demands associated with daily life. They emphasize that it is one's *reaction* to experiences that determines the quality of one's life, a consequence of the meaning ascribed to particular experiences, and add that, "People who are resilient have the ability to move beyond being survivors to being thrivers" (p. 6), a phrase that was employed specifically by Hannah.

> It's that same power, that same Spirit within me, that moves me from being a victim of childhood abuse and rape to a survivor…and maybe even *beyond survivor…to thriver*…if that's even a word…just the *ability to rise above it all.*

According to Dimsdale (as cited in Fine, 1991), resiliency involves the accomplishment of two discrete tasks, responding to the situational demands imposed by the crisis and responding to one's immediate feelings about the event. Fine (1991) maintains that, as a response to trauma, resiliency is characterized by phase-specific attributes. During the acute phase, coping skills are directed toward impact minimization, whereas the recognition and development of a new state of 'normalcy' is the focus of the phase of reorganization. As may be evident to readers, there is considerable agreement amongst these authors as to the essential elements of resilience that permit individuals to transcend adversity and that can precipitate a fundamental change of character, or 'self' transformation. Resilience, the antonym of dissilience, can, therefore, be characterized by a positive attitude, harmonious social relationships, a sense of wholeness and well-being, flexibility and adaptability, wisdom, humour and creativity, perseverance, and religious or spiritual beliefs.

Young-Eisendrath (1996) describes the essence of resilience in the following statement:

> The capacity to be resilient, to respond to difficulty with development, is rooted in many diverse factors, but it consistently depends on *one* thing: the meaning you, the individual, make of where you are. When suffering leads to meanings that unlock the mysteries of life, it strengthens compassion, gratitude, joy, and wisdom. When suffering leads to barriers and retaliations and hatred, it empties you of hope and love, and then misery will lead to misery…The resilient [return] to life enriched with knowledge and wisdom and renewed concern for others. I've seen the opposite as well: people who have been defeated by calamity or, worse yet, negatively transformed into vengeful, resentful, envious, hateful victims. (pp. 21-22)

The aforenoted authors consistently maintain that most resilient individuals emerge from traumatic circumstances as 'new' people, re-born, re-created, and re-defined, having been transformed, as in the alchemical process of refinement through fire. The ability to 'bounce back' to a 'newly defined normalcy' that is substantively different from the pre-suffering event often leads to spiritual enlightenment and its corollaries of greater compassion, wisdom, and confidence in one's ability to endure whatever challenges or 'interruptions' life might present. All of the participants in this investigation were able to find meaning in their adverse circumstances and to develop a new, although radically different, life with the insights gained through suffering. Each woman described finding meaning in the traumatic event that led to a sense of purpose, a renewed appreciation for life, a willingness to dwell with uncertainty, and the development of greater love, compassion, peace, joy, and empathy for others. The characteristics of resiliency that have been identified by the aforenoted authors are clearly evident throughout the narrative accounts of study participants and demonstrate the amazing spiritual strength of each of these women.

Connections with God (god)

As participants began to reconnect with their former lifeworlds and to reinvent or redefine themselves, all of them described the development of either a new or renewed relationship with God (however defined). For those women who had a previous familiarity with religious beliefs and/or a relationship with God, reconnecting with the Divine, or their sacred Source, involved an increased awareness of God in everyday occurrences, or a heightened sense of God's *reality* in their lives. Amanda stated that:

> For a few days after Daniel died, I really questioned God's existence and yet, somehow…I just gradually became aware of God's presence again. After several days of uncertainty, I developed an assurance, once again, that God *did* exist and was, in fact, undergirding and supporting me. I went from *not* knowing to *knowing*. I can't really explain it, but I went from having that empty place to…*knowing* God was there…I *experienced* His presence. God was back in my life…and He was comforting me and being my friend. *The relationship I had had with God earlier was restored…only now it had matured.*

Hannah said she first made a commitment to God when she spoke with a young missionary who shared with her that "God accepts [you] just as you are" and told her she could have a relationship with Him without having to *do* anything first. Although she acknowledges a commitment to God from that point on, it was not until her mother died that Hannah really felt *connected* to God.

> The experience of feeling the presence of God in the wind on my back when my mother died made me very *aware* of the existence of God, or a higher power…for me, it was God. In hindsight, I know He was there all along, but that made it *real*. I *felt* His presence, I just didn't *think* it anymore. I realized He was *really there*. Whether I felt worthy or not, *I was spiritually connected to God.*

After she surrendered herself to the Holy Spirit and to God, Gloria said she felt absolute joy and amazement and kept thinking *"it's real…it's really real!"* June employed similar sentiments to describe her sense of connectedness to God shortly after participating in the rituals of 'laying on of hands' and 'anointing with oil' when she recalled feeling "*this peace, this incredible peace…and a feeling of well-being and a sense of ableness to go on*"; she added that:

> When these things started unfolding, God became very much *more real* to me. Thank God I've come to know there is a *real living God who never abandons me and is always faithful*…or I never would have made it through these difficult times. I have developed so much *more faith and trust in God* and there is *no part of my life that doesn't encompass God* anymore. I am nothing without my *faith*.

When Anne faced her son's health crisis and near death, she stated that "the channels of *communication with God started to open up* again" and she realized she could not maintain just a superficial relationship with God – He was someone she "*really needed* in [my] life". Anne said she started to spend more time with God and learned to really communicate with Him, thereby developing "a *real personal relationship*" with Him.

> When I know my relationship with God is good, I just have such an inner peace and such thankfulness for my life. I have such feelings of happiness, contentment, peace, security, love…I feel so cared about. I have a sense that all is right with the world, despite whatever is happening around me…I know that God is in control. If it hadn't been for *my faith in God and my relationship with Him*, I probably would have ended up on a psychiatric unit. I could never have made it without my *faith*.

Young-Eisendrath (1996) maintains that spiritual or religious beliefs often serve as vehicles for overcoming suffering, facilitating resiliency, and fostering relational connections. Sodestrom and Martinson (1987) maintain that religious faith provides a means of coping that often leads to peace and a sense of inner strength. The existence of such grounding beliefs in the participants interviewed in this investigation often tended to facilitate the discovery of a purpose for their suffering and helped them to develop a deepened sense of personal spirituality and connections to the Sacred.

Faith. All of the participants either explicitly or implicitly made reference to faith as a primary factor in their spiritual development, as illustrated in the preceding comments. Within the body of literature surveyed, faith was often used synonymously with spiritual development and frequently interchanged with it or used to describe a vertical relationship with a personal source of transcendent power (Carson, 1989; McColman, 1997; Moberg, 1979; Peck, 1993;

Salladay & McDonnell, 1989; Savramis, 1979; Sodestrom & Martinson, 1987; Widerquist, 1991). Carson (1989) suggests that faith may be viewed either as a noun (a *belief* in something unseen) or as a verb (a *way of being* or living), both forms of faith evident in participants' experiential accounts. Carson adds that, although faith may be *given* to an individual by God (god) and, therefore, appear instantaneously, it may also be *developed* over time, as a process, also conceptualizations apparent in the women's accounts.

Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) maintain that faith refers to one's personal beliefs and expectations about life and one's relationship with a responsive God (however defined); as such, faith fosters a sense of meaning and satisfaction in life. Fowler (as cited in Carson, 1989) considers faith to be a universally inherent characteristic of human beings, both religious and nonreligious, that permits individuals to view life as meaningful and provides the propensity of 'meaning making'. Jacobs (1998) concurs and adds that "faith provides an intermediate area, a space between, which protects, permeates and filters, contacts, and prepares us for change" (p. 57) in life. Whether conceived of as a noun or a verb, as given or developed, faith has to do with living a purposeful and meaningful existence. Conceptualizations of faith as a necessary component of spiritual development, and as the human capacity for 'meaning making', support the findings of this investigation, as illustrated by participants' comments regarding their connections to God (however defined).

Relationships between humans and the Divine are evident in virtually all of the available literature concerning the human spiritual dimension. The human-God relationships described by many authors refer to relationships with any god, deity, sacred Source, power greater than self, Ultimate Other, cosmic source, transcendent power, or absolute consciousness. For individuals subscribing to atheistic philosophies, spirituality generally reflects adherence to any value(s) that are considered of supreme importance for guiding and directing behaviours and actions. Several authors have identified human-God (god) relationships as vertical (metaphysical) interactions that encompass only one of two dimensions of spirituality; vertical interactions are balanced by horizontal (existential) interactions with others, self, and nature (Ellison, 1983; Karns, 1991; Moberg, 1979; Stoll, 1989). According to Piles (1990), it is the nature of the human spirit to "seek[s] to worship someone or something (such as God) outside one's own powers that controls and/or sustains the person especially in a time of crisis" (p. 38). Such longing to encounter the Sacred is the essence of human spirituality, according to McColman (1997).

Carrie stated that, although she has had a sense of spirituality and has known God since her childhood, all of the personal tragedies and subsequent spiritual experiences really changed and strengthened her beliefs. Now, she admits, God knows her needs and the needs of her family and she "simply trust[s] that *God knows where He wants us* to be", so she will trust completely in Him. Although Grace was familiar with religion, having been raised in the Catholic tradition, it was not until she changed her faith and joined the Science of Mind church that Grace became intimately *connected* to God.

> Before I had a *connection with God*, I thought that God was someone 'out there' and that other people were 'doing to' me…that I was a victim…now I just pray to be *one with God.* I know that God knows me and what I need even more than I do and He will give me anything I need…so *I'm never alone or lonely now.*

At times, the realization that God (god) existed, and that a relationship with Him could be developed, came as a surprise to participants. Although initially unsuccessful, Marjorie sought God within the bounds of organized religion after her suicide attempt and unexplained auditory experience when she claimed to have heard the voice of God and asked, "Are you for real?" About three weeks later, Marjorie again attended church and underwent a conversion experience in which she "felt [my] spirit come alive". As she began to grow in faith, Marjorie says she developed a *"personal relationship with God"* and came to realize that she was loved and accepted by Him.

> The thought that went through my mind was, "If God says, 'I can and will deliver you and set you free', He must *know* me. He just talked to me…so *He must love me*…and He's going to set me free". I developed a knowledge of being *loved* that was *greater than my senses.* Prior to realizing that God *knew* me and loved me, I sensed I was not loved. I felt unconnected… disconnected….unwanted. Now *I was open to being loved.* I was loved. I was accepted. *I was connected!*…and I developed *a real, personal relationship with Him.*

For Lynn, the connection with God came unexpectedly and instantaneously with the delivery of her first child.

> So I have this kid…it was a perfect birth…a little boy. I just freaked, you know. When my son was born, *when I looked into his face, I knew there was a Creator*…and that was a real surprise to me. *I knew there was a Creator who loved me.* It was probably the most intense moment…I felt loved…I could *feel* God's love. I mean…I really believe in my Creator.

Lynn described this experience as sudden, unexpected, and intense; yet, the experience led to a persistent sense of love and commitment, as well as an enduring relationship with her Creator, also described as God (god). Although Lynn still eschews traditional religious institutions, she remains steadfast in her relationship with her Creator. Lynn says she connects with God through prayer and in nature and that the experience ignited a process of change in her life that continues to the present.

Immanence. Perhaps the most significant sub-theme to emerge from participants' accounts of their connections to God (however defined) is that of immanence. Immanence refers to the indwelling divinity, or 'God within', of an individual and has been variously defined by authors as the Holy Spirit (James & James, 1991; Peck, 1993), the basic indwelling principle of life, or the Source within (Keegan, 1994), the inner light (Peck, 1993), and the *Imago Dei*, or image of God, that resides within an individual (Keegan, 1994; Stoll, 1989). Stuart, Deckro, and Mandle (1989) describe the human spirit as a "spark" of the Divine that provides life and dwells within the heart of every individual; as such, it has an immanent nature. Fallding (1979), too, speaks of an immanent, universal presence that "resembles the Holy Spirit" and locates within each person a life principle that is "identical with divinity itself" and is the "internalization of the ground with which the person is encircled" (p. 36). Although none of the participants explicitly used the term 'immanence', it was clearly evident in their narrative accounts of spiritual experience. Virtually all of the participants described having a sense of personal connectedness with a God who resided *within* their being and a feeling of constant, inalienable spiritual presence. With reference to her relationship with God, Grace stated:

> Before I 'woke up' to my soul and spirit…before I had *a real connection with God*, I thought that God was someone 'out there'…now I know that *God is within me*. My life is my own creation *with God*…so now I just pray to be one with God…to feel God *within* me and to know that I am one with Him. It only stands to reason that, if God is all there is, and God never dies, and we are a part of God, and that *part of God is in our soul*…then it cannot die. *We are in God, and God is in us.*

Following her conversion experience, as she began to grow in faith and study the scriptures, Marjorie said:

> When I read that "the Word became flesh and dwells with us", I realized, "Jesus is right *here…in my heart*. The Word is Jesus. The Word is God…so, He's right *here…in my heart. He's in me!*" I don't even know where God begins and I end.

Lynn described the relationship she developed with God after realizing that He existed and accepted her unconditionally, despite her unconventional approach to religion.

> Having my Creator in my life really changes how I think about myself…and how I want to live my life. Having Him around makes me feel better…and knowing that He's not in some building…like a church. *He's right here in my heart*…whenever I want Him… whenever I need Him. And that gives me *a real sense of peace*…knowing that *He never leaves me*. He's not going anywhere, you know? Now it's so much easier to live my life because I know that God loves me just the way I am and is always with me.

Anne reflected on the sense of immanence she discovered immediately following her baptism.

> After he put me down fully under the water and brought me back up, I had this *intense feeling of peace*…a peace that I just can't describe. I felt that all would be well with the world as long as I felt that peace…as long as I had God *with* me…*within* me…right *here* [points to heart]. My *relationship with God* really began to grow after that…and it's a big part of who I am now. There is a solid *presence within me* that I can rely on to always be with me…for all time.

A clear reference to immanence is evident in Carson's (1989) description of the *Imago Dei* that dwells in all human beings. One's image of God is at the core of personhood and provides individuals with the capacity for self-transcendence and communion with the Sacred. Even Nightingale expressed a mystical philosophy of spirituality in her assertion that all of creation *shares an inner divinity* by virtue of being grounded in the same spiritual reality (Macrae, 1995). Immanence, as a characteristic of human spirituality and connectedness to God (however god is defined), is particularly evident in Judaic and Christian scriptures. Biblical proclamations of immanence are found throughout the Old and New Testament scriptures. In the Old Testament, Micah himself declares, "I am *filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord*" (Micah 3:8), while in the New Testament, Paul asks the Corinthians, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that *God's Spirit lives in you*?" (I Corinthians 3: 16). Renetzky (1979) asserts that it is this power *within* an individual that provides a sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment in one's life; for Jews and Christians, this power is traditionally named as God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For individuals in other religious traditions, however, this power may, alternatively, be described in terms of a Creator, god, deity, presence, or Supreme Being.

Although Hannah became aware of the reality of God's existence at her mother's death, it was during counseling for her past childhood physical and sexual abuse that she discovered the intimacy of that relationship.

> In hindsight, I look at all the things that had happened prior to that [mom's death and feeling her spirit leave] and I know *God was there all the time*, but that made it *'real'*...and it made me very aware of His existence. I *felt* it...I realized He was there, and then, during counseling, *I realized He was here, in my heart*...and that *my spirit was connected to God* in a way that I had never known before. Now I was *spiritually connected to God.*

Gloria spoke of knowing "God was with [me], the Holy Spirit was *in* [me]" as she prayed for peace and safety while staying alone one night after a small, spontaneous house fire. After 'hearing' the words, "I am with you...sleep in peace", Gloria said she "knew *God was with [me]* and was able to relax and spend a peaceful night upon receiving such assurance. Finally, when Amanda acknowledged her renewed awareness of God's existence some time after her infant son's death, she described a change in her relationship with God.

> I have heard it said that each one of us has a 'God-shaped' place in side of us that only He can fill...if we earnestly seek Him...that spot was empty for a while...and then it was full again. *I knew that God was there. I experienced His presence.* He gave me an assurance that He was there *with me*...and a peace that I just can't explain. I knew He was with me...*in* me. I had been given this gift of faith and was assured of God's existence and His *abiding presence.*

Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that turning inward facilitates self-awareness, or connections with one's 'self', and it is there that the Divine is also encountered. They emphasize that it is how individuals *experience* God (however defined) that is ultimately of much greater importance for spiritual development than cognitive knowledge *about* God because human beings seek a *relationship* with the Divine source of all life. Experiences of God (god) may manifest as peace, joy, love, gratitude, presence, energy, or transcendence, and may be precipitated by music, art, nature, rituals, worship, or intimate relationships with others. Many participants described experiencing God through mystery, relationships with others, religious rituals, nature, and music, as previously illustrated. The experiences described by these women are entirely consistent with descriptions of immanence found in the literature. Consequently, it is apparent that immanence, as conceptualized and defined within the extant body of knowledge related to spirituality, and as described by participants in this investigation, refers to a dyadic relationship between human beings and God (however defined) and is a critical element of human spirituality and transformation.

Connections with Others

According to study participants, relationships with others became more important after the turning points in their spiritual journeys. New relationships were formed, others renewed, and some were let go entirely. Hannah, Marjorie. and Lynn all described the need to give up some relationships while strengthening others. Although she had started attending a local church and meeting new people, Hannah had maintained many former relationships and tells of her realization that some changes were necessary in her friendships.

> I don't really know if *acceptance* from these people was the key to my going to church, but being there certainly raised my awareness. When I left home, I began to live a very wild lifestyle. I mean, I really went wild! And I found some acceptance and friendship, but I found it in bars and in the drinking crowd. So I was *torn between these two worlds*…on the one hand, I continued drinking and living a very wild lifestyle and, on the other hand, I went to all the church functions with people who invited me to do that. I was living two very different lives and trying hard to keep them from colliding. Gradually, I think it just became clear that *this wasn't working for me and I would have to make a choice*. I had just started dating a Christian fellow at the church, so that helped make up my mind, too. My *circle of friends from the church became bigger and bigger*…in retrospect, I can see God's hand in all of this…and over a course of time, *I just got more involved with the people at church and less involved with the others.*

Marjorie recalled her desire to be "delivered and set free" from her homosexual lifestyle and the growing sense of acceptance and love she felt from people within the church community after her conversion experience. Immediately following her conversion, Marjorie renounced her former relationships and began building a new life for herself within the church community, changes that eventually led to the development of a ministry. Lynn, too, realized that she needed to extricate herself from her former relationships with other hookers, drug abusers, and dealers. She voluntarily entered a detoxification program, where she came to the conclusion that a treatment and rehabilitation program might actually work for her and that her life, indeed, *could* be different from what she had previously known.

> So I signed up for treatment and they told me it would take a month to get in…I thought, "my God, I'm never going to make it" because I had been living with a drug dealer…and partying with all the wrong people, you know…and there were always junkies and people coming and going…and the people I partied with always had drugs. But then, a counselor told me they had a cancellation, but that I would have to be on the bus that afternoon. So I was dropped off at home with an hour to get my stuff together before I was taken to the bus. It was funny because in that one hour I got three phone calls…people saying: "Let's go get high…or let's go party" and stuff like that…and I said "No", which was really quite amazing. I actually said "No"…and *I left them all* and went into treatment.

Lynn also credits her husband, whom she met in the course of treatment, with helping her escape her past life and says that, "If [I] had gone back to Calgary, [I] probably wouldn't be here today" because she believes she would have returned to drugs and prostitution as a result of reconnecting with her mother, renewing her old acquaintances, and returning to an environment and lifestyle with which she was familiar.

Numerous authors have also described relational connections with others as a critical component of spiritual development (Brewer, 1979; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Burns, 1989; Dorff, 1988; Ellis, 1980; Hungelmann et al., 1985; Kelsey, 1995; Romney, 1999; Younger, 1995). Interpersonal connections and interactions, introspection, and contemplation define the spiritual core or 'Self', according to Heriot (1992), while harmonious interconnectedness was determined by Hungelmann et al. to be the basic social process underlying spiritual development. Buber (1970) maintains that an individual's spirit has the power to enter into two distinct types of relationships and, thus, is the distinguishing characteristic of human beings. Relationships may be categorized either as 'I-Thou' or 'I-It', based on the level of intersubjectivity or objectivity. 'I-Thou' relationships are intersubjective and are characterized by mutuality, directness, intensity, ineffability, and presence, while 'I-It' relationships denote a subject-object relation, a lack of mutual connection, and imply the 'use' of other. Consequently, spirituality can only exist in intersubjective relationships with the Eternal Thou (God), or others. Because relationships provide the context in which individuals live their personhood, they must be considered a major component of spiritual maturation and a critical means of discovering meaning and purpose in life (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Goddard, 1995). It is through relationships with others that individuals are able to define themselves and increase their 'self'-awareness; without significant relationships, self-knowledge is impossible. Relationships thus mirror self-development and provide a backdrop for living the various facets of one's 'being' (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002).

Participants also often described a qualitative change in the depth and intensity of close personal relationships that were renewed or had been maintained. Gloria stated that she and her husband had become "*much, much closer to each other*" as a result of their spiritual journeying. Grace found that proximity to death simply increased the love between herself and her second husband and described their relationship as "now totally loving and giving". Although he was frequently admitted to intensive care in the last year of his life, Grace said that, "just to be with him was my *absolute, total joy…it was a sacred time*…and *my greatest gift* outside of my children". She adds that her "*relationships with others are much more important*, too" and says that she has finally healed the rifts in her relationship with her older children. Lynn's marital relationship also became deeper as a result of her connection to the Divine.

> We've gotten a lot more used to each other and…the habits. It's nice, you know, because it takes awhile to work through everything. We've always been pretty honest with each other, but somehow the *level of trust has changed* and, now, *we're a lot closer*. We've been together for almost eleven years…and we're still in love…which is alright. *We're a lot closer now than ever before.*

Lynn also added that she is very close to her children now, too, because she wants them to have positive memories of her "if anything bad happens" and to know how much they are loved, something she never felt growing up. Lynn and her husband have decided to look into the feasibility of moving back to Ontario to try to re-establish familial relationships so that her children come to understand the benefits of extended family. Hannah stated that she developed "a *much closer relationship with [my] dad*...more of a friendship than simply an authoritarian relationship" in the wake of her spiritual experience as she recognized the fragility of life, the reality of God, and the importance of earthly relationships. Carrie also said that *"relationships became really important"* to her as a result of her experiences and she "refuse[s] to hold anger against another person" for personal slights, which also "allows [me] to have *deeper relationships with other people"*. Finally, Amanda asserted:

> I think that my relationships with other people have really changed, too. *I look at people differently now* because I understand that...we all have a sinful nature and we're naturally selfish, so, I think that knowing this has made me *more generous and forgiving in my appraisal of others*...and that allows me to develop much *deeper and closer relationships.*

Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) suggest that the deepening of relationships is a common feature of growth after trauma because individuals often come to realize the importance and fragility of significant interpersonal relationships.

New relationships also figured prominently in the re-integrative process. Grace indicated that it was the social support she received from new found friends in her faith community that sustained her through the final phase of her deteriorating marriage and divorce. Even though her husband had moved the family to a distant locale and deliberately attempted to isolate her from former friends, Grace said she just "wrote a lot of letters because[she] had *made many friends* at the church and *needed to stay in touch with them*" because they were her main source of personal support. Marjorie concluded that, as a result of her conversion experience and spiritual growth:

> I've become more solid in who I am and I have *more stable personal and emotional relationships*. The relationships I have with other people now are *much deeper and more meaningful.*

Lynn says that she has made several close friends and become much more outgoing since her spiritual experience and is no longer reluctant to talk to strangers or develop new relationships; she adds: "I just treat people like human beings now, you know?…we're all equal". June says she developed many new friendships when she became a volunteer at the Breast Centre in the wake of her brush with cancer and spiritual awakening. She began visiting and counseling others who were newly diagnosed with breast cancer and stated:

> I became a volunteer for them and my life became very full and very active as a result. After that, *every time I saw someone, there was a purpose behind it.* I remembered how terrified *I* had been and so it was *easy for me to relate to them* and to help calm some of their fears and to encourage them – it was a really neat experience. Then I got involved with palliative care visits, too, and that was very difficult…but also very rewarding. It provided me with a great deal of *satisfaction and peace.*

Grace, too, connected with others as a hospital volunteer when she began to rebuild her life following her second husband's death. Grace says she needed to feel useful and wanted to help others, so she began volunteering. As she began to get more involved with others and make new friends, Grace indicated that her relationships with others helped to forestall her loneliness and helped her adjust to her new role as a relatively young widow. June also asserted her absolute certainty that God had allowed her to experience adversity so she could *share her experiences with others.* She admits that she would not feel so enlightened without having experienced what it was to suffer because she likely would have remained "on the fence" in her relationship with God and would not have developed her own spirituality. Hannah indicated that, although she is still selective in who she connects with, she has gradually learned to trust other people and finds it "*easier to connect with other people* now".

Fischer (1990) emphasizes that individuals are *constituted* by their relationships because they exist, firstly, interdependently within a community and only secondly, independently, as individuals. As such, relationships are not external, but rather internal to 'being'. Wright and Sayre-Adams (2000) assert that interpersonal relationships are the proving ground of spiritual development because that is where the personal knowledge one has acquired (love, compassion, empathy, etc.) is put into practice. It is through relationships that individuals become 'complete', expand their consciousness, and are transformed. McColman (1997) maintains that relationships with others are iconic in nature because they reveal something about an individual's relationship with the Sacred; he claims, "whenever we gaze into another person's eyes, we run the risk of suddenly seeing the eyes of the Divine in that person's face" (p. 168). This view was evident in Grace's comment, "I never meet a stranger because *I always see the God in them*...and I know *we have a common thread* between us". Consequently, relationships not only shape, but are shaped by, one's relationship with the Divine.

Two sub-themes emerged from participants' descriptions of their connections with others; the first was the notion of *presence*, and the second was the concept of *community*. Presence was implicitly acknowledged in terms of the nature, quality, and intensity of significant interpersonal relationships. Community was more explicitly demonstrated through the affiliative relationships held by participants in a variety of social groups, such as those found in religious institutions and voluntary organizations.

Presence. Presence is a term that is frequently associated with close interpersonal relationships of the type described by Buber (1970); it is characterized by an attitude of humility, vulnerability, and openness to others. The word 'presence' is derived from the Old French *present* and Italian *presente* meaning an offering or gift (Onions, 1998). Harpur (as cited in Younger, 1995) describes presence as a primordial closeness or unity with another, while Paterson and Zderad (as cited in McKivergin & Daubenmire, 1994) define presence as "a mode of being available or open in a situation with the wholeness of one's unique individual being; *a gift of self* [emphasis added] which can only be given freely, invoked or evoked" (p. 67). As such, presence implies intimacy, mutuality, and the ability to connect with 'other' in a way that demonstrates patience, empathy, respect, trust, value, and the uniqueness of both individuals entering into the relationship.

Fish and Shelly (1978) maintain that listening, empathy, humility, commitment, and vulnerability are the essential components of presence. Listening is an active process of complete attendance to both the visual and verbal cues of another. Humility and commitment are embodied by one's ability to accept oneself and others unconditionally and one's availability to another for as long as support is needed. Empathy and vulnerability involve the vicarious experiencing of another's feelings and the voluntary exposure of one's inner self to another. Presence enables one to set aside personal concerns and to genuinely share of oneself with another (Buber, 1970; Carson, 1989; Heriot, 1992; Kreidler, 1984; Lane, 1987; Sims, 1987; Walker, 1992; Younger 1995). Longaker (1997) stresses that presence is the key to supportive relationships and points out that *paraclete*, a Greek word for comforter, refers to one who 'walks alongside' another and provides a loving presence. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that spiritual presence, the heart of connective harmonious relationships, flows from one's sense of connectedness with the Divine. Such a sense of connectedness may explain the increased intensity and importance of interpersonal relationships described by the women in this investigation. Listening, sharing of self, openness, empathy, humility, and commitment to others are clearly illustrated by the excerpts from participants' accounts of spiritual transformation throughout many of the thematic discussions and are exemplified in descriptions of relationships with others as "deeper and more meaningful". These same characteristics are also illustrated by the desire to provide service to others expressed by participants who engaged in volunteer activities to calm and support those who were suffering and in need of comfort.

Community. A second significant sub-theme that emerged from participants' descriptions of connections with others was that of community. The word 'community' comes from the Latin *communitatem* meaning 'common' and refers to a social group whose members are united by virtue of some shared, or common, characteristic or interest (Onions, 1998; Urdang, 1980). According to McColman (1997), faith generally thrives within community precisely because it provides a cultural context for the development and maturation of beliefs. Community involves relationships and, in community, individuals are exposed to the traditions, teachings, ceremonies, practices, history, and beliefs of a particular community's culture and are, thus, socialized into the group. Socialization occurs in communities, whether they are formally or informally structured, and extends to the 'communities' of family, friends, co-workers, affiliative groups, and even to political, economic, geographic, and ethnic organizations or groups. Several qualities must be demonstrable in a group for a genuine community to exist, including a shared vision and purpose, a sense of belonging, and a willingness to relate with others, regardless of significant differences. Fischer (1990) implies that a sense of community may be intergenerational and extemporaneous if there is a recognition that all life is interconnected and that all individuals influence or are influenced by others as a function of participation in the universe. Neeld (1997) suggests that participation in a community involves the 'giving up' of one's 'self' for the greater benefit of the group while, at the same time, community provides a primary source of social support for the individual participating within it.

A sense of community was often apparent in participants' descriptions of connections with other members of religious institutions, as previously illustrated by comments such as those made by Marjorie and Hannah. Grace began her spiritual development by venturing into a new church where she felt immediately welcomed and accepted. Only when she tentatively reached out to others in the faith community, after years of psychological abuse, did Grace find friendship and spiritual peace; it was also during the same period that Grace was introduced to her second husband by one of her new acquaintances. It was at the invitation of a pastor who unexpectedly knocked on her door that Anne began attending her local church where, she says, she began to really feel welcomed and developed *"a sense of family and fellowship" with others*. Amanda, too, recalled forming significant connections with others in her church community.

> After Daniel died, we started attending church…and God began *bringing some people into our lives who liked talking about God* and who enjoyed *sharing their spiritual experiences with us*…and that's when my spiritual growth really began.

Although spiritual values were often associated with religious communities, a sense of community was also evident outside the bounds of religious organizations for some study participants. After a number of years as a volunteer in a cancer hospital, and several recurrences of her own cancer, June says she had become very fatigued and felt she could no longer drive such long distances, yet she wanted to continue working with others and sharing her experiences. June had decided that she wanted to be associated with young people because she had "always *loved* teenagers" and so she prayed for, and currently now has, a ministry working with local high school girls in her community. June acknowledges that she derives great internal strength from interacting with the girls and has "*drawn very close* to all of them", just as she had as a cancer volunteer. Such social structures form the basis of community and provide environments that are conducive to the formation of interpersonal relationships, the discovery of a shared humanity, and the development of increased self-awareness, all of which are requisite to spiritual maturation and personal transformation.

Connections with Self

The spiritual awakenings experienced by participants initiated a process of introspection and contemplation that led to the subsequent development of an expanded sense of self-awareness and precipitated a process of change. Grace recalled the gradual discovery of her spiritual 'self'.

> I began to wake up to my soul…my *'self'*. I became metaphysically oriented and attuned to *myself*. I began to feel my spirit, my 'self'…to feel *me*…and I realized that, even though I had lost my breasts and reproductive organs to cancer, no one could take the *essence of 'me'* and *I* would be okay. From then on, I began to change and to *feel my worth as a person*. I have become *much more introspective and am more self-aware*, now.

Hannah stated that a significant turning point in her spiritual journey occurred during counseling when she had an awakening of her spirit and *connected* with her 'Self'.

> I had an awakening of my spirit…I began to *understand myself* and to *learn about myself*. It was kind of like a spiritual *introduction*…like I was being introduced to *me*. I had been disconnected…from my *'self'*…and now I was being *re-introduced*. I had been wounded by the abuse…my *spirit* had been broken…and I began to recognize that *I* was more than the sum of events that had happened to me…that wasn't who *I* was…I began to change… to see who I was created to be. *I connected with my spiritual 'self'*. After that, rather than continuing to draw my identity from the outside, from who I was told I was, I began to

> draw my identity from the inside, from my *spirit*…and from God. I learned who *I* was and I came to *know myself. I developed a 'self' identity*…and I know my identity is the essence of who *I* am…I've become a participant in my life and not just a passive observer of it. I can finally *be* who I am because I *know* who I am.

It was also through counseling that Lynn began to discover who she was and to feel "like a real *person*", and through faith development and spiritual counseling that Marjorie maintains she finally gained a personal 'self' identity.

> As I grew in my faith and in my identity as a child of God, I began to change…I began to see the *real 'me'*, and the pain I felt from not having an identity began to subside. I started to learn about *myself* and gained knowledge about *who* I was and *what* I was. *I learned about myself*…and that led to healing. The recognition of my identity and the *knowledge of myself*, the *true me*, brought about healing and it brought about change.

Connecting with one's spiritual core, or essential self, necessarily involves heightened interiority and a concern for integration. Self-integration presupposes a level of self-knowledge that is constantly evolving and developing. Maslow maintained that 'self'-knowledge, life experience, and maturation are necessary antecedents to self-actualization (Byrne, 1985), one of the characteristics of spirituality, also defined as harmonious interconnectedness, postulated by Burkhardt (1989). According to Hungelmann et al. (1985), connecting with one's inner self is associated with attributes of intentionality, self-determination, a positive attitude, and the ability to live a meaningful life. A well-developed sense of spiritual self-awareness has also been described as a source of inner strength, an 'inner knowing', a coping ability, and an internal resource (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Burns, 1989; Dettmore, 1986; Dickinson, 1975; Fulton, 1995; Heriot, 1992; Moberg, 1979; Reed, 1991; Renetzky 1979; Romney, 1999; Soeken & Carson, 1987; Steeves & Kahn, 1987; Stoll, 1979; Younger, 1995).

Connections with one's spiritual self are manifested in a variety of activities, including transcending, connecting, giving life, and being free (Lane, 1987). Transcending one's adverse circumstances demonstrates personal growth and provides a sense of purpose and destination. Connecting involves a desire to belong and to secure an identity within a particular community. Giving life refers to self-maturation, self- transformation, and a sense of altruism. Being free implies the capacity to choose one's attitude and behaviours, even when faced with adversity. Examples of transcendence, connectedness, transformation, and choice have been provided from participants' accounts of spiritual experience; each of these examples illustrates the spiritual self-awareness, or connectedness with 'self', that was characteristic of each woman in this study.

As participants connected with their spiritual centers, or 'selves', they began to reflect upon and examine their lives and to re-create and transform themselves in accordance with their newly acquired self-awareness. They also recognized the need to spend time with themselves to nurture their spirits and to contemplate their relationships with the Divine and with others. Frequently, participants identified music and/or spiritual reading as activities that strengthened and nurtured their spirits. Spending time out of doors and enjoying nature were also commonly described as nurturing to one's spirit and will be discussed under the heading '*Connections with Nature*' in a subsequent section. Although most Western societies place little value on quiet reflection, meditation, and 'self' awareness, such practices are vital to spiritual development and require a change in perspective, according to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002). Connecting with one's inner self requires a mental shift from 'doing' (productivity) to 'being' (stillness) as a means of gaining spiritual wisdom. It involves a deliberate focus on the self and particular attention to the objects of immediate perception, the achievement of which permits insight to develop.

Several participants suggested that while taking time to nurture their own spirits they often simultaneously also enhanced their relationships with God (god). Perhaps connections with the Divine were strengthened because the participants were able to recognize the reflection of God's (god's) Spirit in their own spirits, a conceptual connection that was previously identified from the literature as an immanent Presence, or a 'Spark of the Divine'. Dhanen (2001) confesses that she relies on her counselor/friend to help her remain "closely *connected* with [my] body" because it is "the imperfect home in which [my] soul resides" and from within which her '*self*' can shout "*I am!*" She adds that she will often put on "soothing music and saturate [myself] with inspiring words" that have brought her healing in the past and *connect her with her inner resources*. Anne, too, described how music helped her reflect on her relationship with God and often brought about transcendent feelings.

> Especially when my relationship with God is good and my spirit is high…when I really want to rejoice and just *nurture my spirit* and feel good, I listen to spiritual *music*. I like contemporary Christian music…and, sometimes, I get carried away by the music and *I feel so free*. I can really *feel everything that's in my heart*…the fullness, the peace, the joy, and the thankfulness. When that happens, *I feel really close to God...and nothing else matters*.

Carrie described music as a form of worship and a means of finding spiritual calm.

> Sometimes I just listen to music. I've always loved music…it doesn't really matter what kind because I'm pretty eclectic, so it just depends on my mood at the time, but I find it *really nurtures my spirit*. I think you can be with God and *worship God* however you are comfortable and *feel close to God* and, for me, that's often in *music*.

Music was not played exclusively when participants perceived their lives to be going well and wanted to 'worship' or 'rejoice'; Lynn described listening to music as a means to 'lift' her spirit when she felt "a little down".

> Whenever I feel 'down', I talk to a friend…or I *listen to music*…that's my thing, but I don't listen to heavy metal anymore. Sometimes, now, I listen to dance music…or some of the harmony tapes, you know, like 'Cries of the Wolf'. *The music really gives me strength and helps me really feel close to God.*

Although music was commonly used by participants to nurture their spirits, various other spiritual practices were identified from within the literature surveyed as alternative means of facilitating connections with one's inner being and of developing 'self' awareness. Such practices include but are not limited to prayer, meditation, visualization, music, creative activities, art, religious rituals and spiritual practices, and mindfulness (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; McColman, 1997; Taylor, 2002). Regardless of the nature of the activities employed to nurture their spirits, the women in this investigation consistently described a need to remove themselves from the 'busy-ness' of daily life to spend 'quiet' time, alone, to contemplate life and connect with their inner 'selves', a need subsequently labeled 'solitude'. Remaining closely connected with their spiritual 'selves' was instrumental for the transformative changes that gradually occurred within these women.

Solitude. The desire to nurture one's relationship with 'self' and/or God (however defined) was often revealed in participants' descriptions of their pursuit of solitary activities that permitted contemplative silence and personal introspection and evaluation. As such, solitude emerged as a sub-theme in several of the relational categories identified under the thematic heading *'Resilience and Reconnection'*. Solitude is the intentional pursuit of aloneness, usually for some purpose of spiritual nourishment, according to McColman (1997), and must not be mistaken for loneliness. He adds, "Solitude is not the same as being lonely, for loneliness is the sense of being *imprisoned* by aloneness, while solitude involves a sense of *liberation* through aloneness" (p. 92). Solitude is a state of mind, according to Whitfield (1995), that permits individuals to rest in silence, explore their inner lives, acquire self-knowledge and 'self'-love, and access their intuition and creativity. Intentionally setting oneself apart from others to nourish one's spirit opens the 'self' to an encounter with the Sacred and, as such, must be "understood not just in terms of 'absence' (the absence of other people) but in terms of 'presence' – the presence of the Sacred" (McColman, 1997, p. 93). Foster (1978) suggests that solitude involves an attitude of attentiveness and a sense of inner fulfillment that displaces distractions and enables one to "hear the divine Whisper" (p. 97). Only when distractions are minimized can transformation, at the soul level, begin.

Neeld (1997) defines solitude as a companionship with one's 'self', a time of internal 'self'-exploration that facilitates the development of insight, creativity, and a sense of cosmic interconnectedness and/or transcendence. According to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002), connecting with the 'self' in inner stillness provides access into the Great Mystery and facilitates the discovery of meaning that would otherwise remain beyond human understanding. Grace recalled her need for solitude in the following comment.

> When I really want to feel spiritually *connected*, I spend *some quiet time by myself.* I put some soft music on and do some spiritual reading. I just take some time *by myself* to get *into myself.* I try not to worry about anything and to *allow myself to be partners with God.* I do a lot of *inner-talk with God*…and *I listen to my higher self. I really listen to what's going on in my soul.*

Communication with God was also evident in Anne's need to be alone with God.

> My relationship with God is like any other relationship. If I want the relationship to grow, *I have to spend time with Him*…to really communicate with Him…so it isn't superficial. *I need to open my heart to Him and really listen to Him. I need to spend time alone with Him…in His presence*, so I don't lose touch.

Marjorie, too, stated that she required quiet solitude to develop in her spiritual journey.

> Every day I try to practice the presence of Jesus. By that I mean…*I sit quietly, I close my eyes, and I meditate…or visualize…and focus…and we have a two-way conversation.* That way, I am able to grow in my relationship with Him because I believe all of us are spiritual beings, whether we know it or not, and we are meant to be in relationship with God and with each other…so I need to spend time with Him every day.

Journalist Rita Dhanen (2001) describes sitting quietly in a favorite place, listening to soothing music and reading inspirational literature that has brought her healing in the past, as two means of nurturing her spirit; she admits that authors such as Merton, Nouwen, and King David have provided her with spiritual direction and comfort while assisting her to marshal internal resources and develop inner strength. Despite her physical illness, Dhanen states "[my] soul rests secure". In the transcendent peace that proceeds from these readings and music, she maintains, "the dark cloud dissipates, fear and anxiety vanish. [I am] weightless once again" (p. A1).

Each of the practices described by these participants permitted them to access their inner beings, or spiritual 'selves', through the cultivation of quiet and solitude, thereby also enhancing their relationships with God (however defined). The Spanish theologian and medieval mystic, Saint John of the Cross advocated the practice of meditation and interior silence, wherein the Divine Spirit could "secretly anoint[s] the soul and heal[s] our deepest wounds" (John of the Cross, as cited in Borysenko, 1993, p. 167). The cultivation of inner silence and solitude often promotes healing, facilitates spiritual growth or regeneration, and leads to greater sensitivity and compassion for other people as a function of the increased 'self'-awareness that is developed in response to intimate communication with the Divine (Foster, 1978). Fischer (1990) maintains that solitude is essential to the process of self-integration because it provides the environmental context for individuals to develop both unity in community and individuality, thereby enabling them to contribute more creatively and effectively in their relationships. She adds that, "true solitude is [thus] always marked by compassion for others and a reverence for all being" (p. 9). Consequently, solitude facilitates regeneration and integration while also, indirectly, promoting community.

Connections with Nature

Connections with the natural world were reflected in the accounts of most participants and deemed by many as essential for renewing their spiritual 'selves', as well as for nurturing their relationships with God (however defined). Lynn found solace in the outdoors and her pets and stated that being in nature provided her with a sense of participation in the universe, lifted her spirit(s), enhanced her relationship with the Divine, and provided her with inner strength.

> Whenever I feel kind of 'down', I go *and pet my animals...or go bike riding*. When I feel the wind in my hair and the sun on my face, *I really feel closer to God*. I love watching butterflies, too. *I really love nature*...that's where *I* am. *I find my Creator there*...and when I look at my animals...and my kids, *I feel a part of it*. Like...I'm no longer separate, sort of on the outside looking in. *I feel a part of nature, and that gives me strength.* I have a lot guinea pigs...they're kind of my big 'thing'...and a bird. I get a lot of affection from them. I get a lot of *strength from my faith...and from my pets.*

Carrie, also, described the spiritual peace she derives from engaging with the natural world and her appreciation of and sense of connection with nature.

> When I want to be alone with God and to really *nurture my spirit*, I go for a walk in the park, or down to the ponds, or over towards the ranch...sometimes I like to just lie down on the riverbank among all the willows and aspens and watch the clouds...listen to the breeze and the sound of the water – that's always been *very recharging to me*. It's a very relaxing place, very peaceful...quieting. It just *quiets my spirit and brings me peace*.

Interactions with the natural world may also precipitate introspection and reflective contemplation of the cosmic interconnectedness of all life or other searching existential questions that are indicative of a relationship with the Divine. Romney (1999) maintains that all individuals have "a deep and pervasive longing to be connected with nature" (p. 14) as a place for retreat and a means of renewal. As the mind is quieted in reflection, consciousness and self-awareness are expanded, meaning and purpose is clarified, transcendence becomes possible, and life is enriched. Being in nature can facilitate regeneration and healing on many levels as individuals increasingly become aware of their intimate interconnectedness with and complete dependence upon nature as the ultimate source of their very being. Such an awareness engenders a sense of awe, reverence, and respect for all forms of life. According to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002);

> Our spirits prompt us to honor the sacredness of all life, as we recognize that our well-being and, indeed, our survival is intricately dependent on our relationship with nature. Expanding our own boundaries to engage in more conscious participation with nature enables us to reconnect with our true selves, appreciating the wonder and mystery of our own places in the sacred circle of creation, the universe. (p. 231)

Connections with nature were also frequently found within the literature related to human spirituality and spiritual well-being and support the findings of this investigation. Connectedness to nature was described by numerous authors as a significant and meaningful relationship with one's immediate environment that is demonstrated by a respect for all life, an appreciation of the natural world, and a feeling of unity or oneness with and participation in the greater universe (Boldman, 1999; Burkhardt, 1991; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994; Christy & Lyon, 1979; Fischer, 1990; Hungelmann et al., 1985; Karns, 1991; Stuart, Deckro, & Mandle, 1989; Taylor, 2002; Walton, 1996; Webster, 1994; Whitfield, 1995; Younger, 1995).

Barker (1989) found that connections with nature were critical to the development and maintenance of a sense of spiritual well-being in her study of spirituality in healthy adult women. Connections with the natural world fostered feelings of inclusion and participation in the cosmos and enhanced one's awareness of human-God (god) relationships, thereby leading to feelings of happiness, peace, and contentment. In a similar study of spirituality in adult women, Burkhardt (1991) identified awakenings within 'Self', 'aliveness', inner strength, and a sense of comfort as consequent outcomes of an individual's connections with the natural world. Such connections with nature were generally demonstrated through respect and appreciation for and care of one's immediate natural environment.

Connectedness to nature is described by Fischer (1990) as a form of prayer that is grounded in a sense of reverential awe and wonder at the mystery and grandeur of the universe, as well as a recognition of the interdependence of all life. Wright and Sayre-Adams (2000) maintain that the plant and animal worlds form an integral aspect of 'I-Thou' relationships and are a reflection of one's connections with others and the Divine. They further suggest that individuals find solace, comfort, and a sense of being 'at one' with one's 'self' in nature because it has the capacity to attune one to the transcendent. Whitfield (1995) describes one's relationship with nature as a reverence for the "Divine Presence in all things" through which one gains entry into the great Mystery and is able to "join the living flow of love" (p. 45). Walton (1996) agrees and extends such relationships to include natural forces such as the wind and sun. The foregoing perspectives are all organismic by nature and imply balance, unity, and integration into a larger, living whole. Feelings of respect, reverence, responsibility, and stewardship are natural consequences of one's awareness that nature itself is the ultimate source of all human nourishment and sustenance.

McColman (1997) suggests that nature serves an iconic function in that experiencing the vastness, majesty, and wonder of nature "can reveal to the perceptive eye a reality of love and power and mystery that is actually *beyond* nature" (p. 75); as such, the natural world is viewed by many as an "ideal bridge to God" (p. 131). Taylor (2002) concurs and emphasizes that many religious traditions view the natural world as the handiwork, residence, or even the embodiment of God (however defined); therefore, experiencing nature often leads to experiencing God (god). Consequently, connections with nature may also carry with them elements of transcendence and infuse individuals with enthusiasm and a 'zest' for living.

Connections with nature were often interwoven with other aspects of interconnectedness, such as relationships with God (however defined), others, and self, and frequently were found to enhance the quality and intensity of the relationships. Relationships, regardless of the categorical nature of the connection, are at the heart of spiritual development and self-transformation. In the words of Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002), "Every relationship and experience is a gift and an opportunity for discovering more of who we are, and for bringing us to a deeper sense of our wholeness, wherein lies our ultimate healing" (p. 43).

Theme Five: Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence

> *Integration means the creation of an inner unity, a center of strength and freedom, so that the being ceases to be a mere object, acted upon by outside forces, and becomes a subject, acting from its own "inner space" into the space outside itself.*
>
> *E. F. Schumacher*

> *I could not say I believe. I know! I have had the experience of being gripped by something stronger than myself, something that people call God.*
>
> *Carl G. Jung*

As participants began to reconnect with their lifeworlds, they were able to begin to move forward, beyond their tragic circumstances. Although many unanswered questions remained and participants continued to wonder about the reasons for their suffering; the nature of their queries shifted. Questions that were initially posed from a sense of victimization and vulnerability began to reflect a sense of awe and wonder at the mystery of the universe and their place within it. A profound sense of awe is a natural response to the realization of one's existential limitations when one considers the vastness of God (however defined), according to McColman (1997). It "arises from the insight that whoever or whatever created the vastness of the heavens and the galaxies is so much *bigger* [emphasis in original] than we are that, by comparison, we are reduced to utter insignificance" (p. 55).

For many of the women there appeared to also be a recognition that acceptable answers might not be forthcoming during their lifetime, despite continued questioning of the meaning or purpose behind the crisis. Most women suggested that they would simply have to trust that there *was* some meaning and purpose to the tragedies that had befallen them. Each woman described the development of trust in and reliance upon some power greater than self, in God (however defined), or in a Creator, with whom a relationship was developed. Uncertainty would have to be tolerated as faith and trust grew that there was some meaning and purpose to the trauma and suffering even if it was not immediately knowable. God (however defined) had an ultimate plan and purpose for each life and the trials must be patiently endured and would eventually lead to personal growth and self-actualization – each would be "better" for the experience. Even though Anne felt the pain of her husband's extramarital affair, she stated that:

> Even in the turmoil and all the hurt…I had a feeling that I would be all right…that I would get through this and that somehow *I'd be a better person for it.*

June, too, stated that her diagnosis of cancer would, ultimately, make her a better person.

> I totally believe that *everything* is part of God's plan for my life and it's either for *my good or for someone else's good or for both.* I guess I also just want to say to others, "Don't fear whatever comes your way. Embrace it…because if you do, you'll undoubtedly watch something *beautiful and miraculous transpire in your life*".

Despite her inability to understand the loss of her infant son to SIDS, Amanda confided that, "no matter what happens, no matter how things look, I know that God is *working it all for good*".

The belief that one will 'be a better person' for having suffered and overcome one's adversity by turning to God (however defined) is firmly rooted in the teachings of many world religions and is particularly prevalent in Christianity, the faith tradition to which all of the women in this study were exposed, despite the later lack of adherence to traditional religion by some. Teilhard de Chardin (1974) writes:

> In virtue of his very perfections, God cannot ordain that the elements of a world in the course of growth – or at least of a fallen world in the process of rising again – should avoid shocks and diminishments…But God *will make it good*– he will take his revenge, if one may use the expression – by making evil itself *serve a higher good* of his faithful (p. 73)… The loss which afflicts us will oblige us to turn for the satisfaction of our frustrated desires to less material fields [so] man (sic) [will emerge] ennobled, tempered and renewed from some ordeal, or even some downfall, which seemed bound to diminish or lay him (sic) low forever [emphases added] (pp. 75-76).

According to McColman (1997), the development of trust in a greater power and a sense of awe and reverential wonder are characteristic of a developing spirituality. The term 'wonder' is etymologically derived from the Old English *'wundor'*, meaning "astonishing or marvelous; and perplexed astonishment (Onions, 1998). To wonder is "to be filled with admiration, amazement, or awe; to marvel; the emotion excited by what is strange, admirable, or surprising; and a miraculous deed or event" (Urdang, 1980). McColman makes an interesting point about wonder when he suggests that 'wonder' and 'wound' may both originate in the same term. He claims that 'wonder' was originally spelled *'wounder'* and that 'wound' was originally spelled *'wonde'*, suggesting the likelihood that the terms are linked.

> [The relationship] certainly makes sense, for a wound is an opening up – of the skin, of the emotions, or perhaps even of consciousness itself. Similarly, wonder "opens us up" mentally and emotionally to the astonishing glory of the Divine. Both wound and wonder are interruptions of our tightly controlled, safely-constructed world – the world of willfulness and self-protection. (p. 47)

Awe and wonder at the mystery of life only appeared after each woman recognized and accepted her existential vulnerability and reached the turning point. Often it began in an act of surrender or an experience of mystery and developed in response to the realization that there was a vaster, greater presence in control of the universe and that questions of 'why' events had occurred were likely to go unanswered, at least for the present. The development of trust in 'Other' initiated a spiritual quest that began the process of 'self' transformation and allowed participants to move beyond and transcend their trauma or existential challenge.

Finding Meaning and Purpose

The search for purpose and meaning to one's life and major life changes/transitions has consistently been identified in the literature as the primary function of spirituality. The inability to ascribe meaning to one's life and circumstances often results in the development of spiritual distress (Burnard, 1987; Frankl, 1959; Kriedler, 1984) and a sense of woundedness, as described by Hannah and Marjorie. Frankl (1959) maintains that spirituality is a search for the ultimate meaning of one's existence. He further asserts that the human propensity to transcend suffering and adversity is made possible by the indomitable freedom of the spirit to choose a particular response to such circumstances. As such, *transcendence* becomes *a function of choice* (or an act of will) and is one means of finding meaning in life. Other methods of ascribing meaning to life events include engaging in *creative spiritual activities* and *experiencing something or someone beyond the self* (mystery). These activities for ascribing meaning to life events are consistent with the characteristics of spirituality identified in the historical and contemporary literature presented earlier, including that related to the formation of relational connections, the capacity for self-transcendence, and the will to act that serves as a source of energy for self-integration.

In a study of spirituality among the elderly, Trice (1990) concluded that a concern for others, selfless actions, and a positive attitude were characteristic attributes of spiritual experience from which the elderly were able to derive a sense of meaningfulness for their lives. Burnard (1987) and Moberg (1979) suggest that the ability to invest life with meaning enhances one's overall physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. Increased self-confidence and resiliency (Fallding, 1979), as well as an appreciation for life and a 'zest' for living (Byrne, 1985) are also outcomes of one's ability to find meaning in one's circumstances. Consequently, satisfaction with life and acceptance of the complete range of life experiences, both positive and negative, are contingent upon one's ability to find meaning in one's life journey (Heriot, 1992; Hungelmann et al., 1985). Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) emphasize that meaning is an inner resource that is discovered only as individuals awaken to all of the experiences of *being* and is something felt as deep, inner knowledge that guides and directs future thoughts and actions. Young-Eisendrath (1996) adds that meaning emerges over time and is a function of perspective and choice rather than events themselves; she agrees that it is the discovery of meaning that ultimately permits transcendence to occur.

Carrie described her tolerance of uncertainty in the face of questioning, searching, and wondering about the sudden death of her husband at the age of 59 years:

> I don't think I would have been able to carry on if I didn't believe there was *some point to all of this suffering*, you know, that there was some *purpose* to life. That's all that keeps me going sometimes....I've had a sense of spirituality all my life, but these experiences have really changed and strengthened my beliefs.

Grace commented that the *purpose* of human life is "to share [the lessons] we have learned in our past lives". Anne, too, spoke of having a sense of peace and direction in her life that flowed from her trust in God's wisdom, love, power, and control over all aspects of her life and allowed her to find purpose in her life. Although the purpose of a suffering experience could not be immediately known, participants were able to accept that, ultimately, there was some purpose and, therefore, *suffering and uncertainty must be tolerated.* Some time after her mastectomy, June stated:

> I began to see that I was *put through this fire for a reason* – there's no question of that in my mind....God has created my life for a *purpose* – I didn't know that for quite a long time but I have become very aware of that through my experience. I realize that God didn't create my life just for June...He created my life for a great *purpose* as He has for every person....God has provided me with a whole new sense of *meaning* in my life and my faith has become very strong.

Hannah, too, reflected on the suffering caused by her physical and sexual abuse and commented:

> I'm very aware now that there is *something beyond* the 'here and now' and that my life is more than what happens in this world. I know that there is a *purpose* for my being beyond this physical plane.

Following her father's death, she added that:

> I realized that God had given us those last five years as a gift and that this was the time. After that, I developed a real peace about his death and I realized that there was a *purpose* in God's plan and that there was a time for everything...even beyond this physical realm...that it was already ordained.

The ability to accept that suffering and adversity was ultimately meaningful and personally beneficial, and that it served a particular purpose allowed participants to tolerate the uncertainty and lack of answers to profound existential questions and to move beyond, or transcend, the circumstances of their present suffering. Rando (1988) suggests that:

> Questions pertaining to the philosophical reason why it happened and how it fits into the scheme of life are [more] difficult to answer....Reasons that cannot be understood may have to be assimilated as just that – something that cannot be comprehended but must be accepted or at least tolerated. Accepting the fact that there is a reason, although unknown can be a therapeutic step for some that helps them cope a little better with an unfathomable event. (p. 43)

Taylor (2002), Moody and Arcangel (2001), and Buckman (1996) all assert that, while it is human to wrestle with questions of suffering, answers attributed to such questions may not be provable or even knowable; often, questions are unanswerable and the uncertainty surrounding them must simply have to be tolerated. Burkardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2000) emphasize that questions of ultimate concern, or existential questions, are "spiritual" in nature and suggest that they defy understanding and, as such, are best expressed tentatively, or considered as mystery. Nevertheless, the ability to find a sense of meaning and purpose in life is central to one's ability to tolerate uncertainty and to transcend suffering and loss. Therefore, the search for meaning to life's existential concerns is a primary component of the spiritual journey.

Transcendence

The word *transcendence*, although not specifically used by any of the participants, was chosen as a descriptor for this theme because it exemplified the transition from the phase of dis-integration, characterized by suffering, to that of re-integration, characterized by personal growth and transformational change. During this phase, each participant exhibited a unique ability to move beyond her traumatic circumstances and to transform herself, to tolerate uncertainty, and to trust that there was some meaning to the tragic events. Consequently, the ability to transcend adversity and embrace a new and radically altered reality bears further testimony to the resiliency and courage of each of the participants.

The term 'transcendence' is derived from the Latin *transcendere* or Old French *transcendre* meaning to climb over, surmount, rise above, or surpass some obstacle or limit (Onions, 1998; Urdang, 1980). Transcendence has also often been described as the ability to push beyond one's present circumstances (Brewer, 1979), the capacity to go beyond self (Ellison, 1983; Haase, Britt, Coward, Kline Leidy, & Penn, 1992; Widerquist, 1991), and as the sensation of being transported to another reality (Labun, 1988). It is further considered by most authors to be a primary constituent element of human spirituality (Brewer, 1979; Burkhardt, 1989; Chapman, 1986; Coward & Reed, 1996; Emblen, 1992; Forbis, 1988; Haase et al., 1992; Karns, 1991; Keegan, 1994; Kelsey, 1995; Labun, 1988; McColman, 1997; Moore, 1992; Pilch, 1988; Piles, 1990; Reed, 1991; Salladay & McDonnell, 1989; Webster, 1994; Williams, 1991). According to Frankl (1959), it is transcendence that permits communion with something or someone beyond the 'self'. Most of the aforenoted authors also, either explicitly or implicitly, refer to two conceptual dimensions of transcendence, existential and metaphysical, that are dependent on the *object* of the relationship and the underlying worldview or hermeneutic horizon of the individual concerned.

Reed (1987a, 1991) describes transcendence as existential in nature and maintains that it involves an expansion of one's personal boundaries and is a developmental resource for healing. Lane (1987) too asserts that it involves boundary expansion inwardly, outwardly, and upwardly, thereby also suggesting a relationship with God (god). Others maintain that peak experiences and the ability to transcend self are what give meaning to one's life, and, as such, transcendence can be found in everyday events and need not reflect metaphysical characteristics (Brewer, 1979; Conti-O'Hare, 2002; Eversole & Hess, as cited in Stoll 1989; Moore, 1992). Younger (1995), however, suggests that transcendence is related *specifically* to the Divine or to one's source of meaning. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) concur, and emphasize that transcendence is *necessarily* related to supernatural realities and, therefore, must be considered metaphysical. Regardless of the nature of transcendence as existential or metaphysical, the experience is one of unity and harmony that dissolves time and temporarily removes one from present time and space. Changes made as a result of transcendental insights may then become permanently fixed in one's lifestyle.

Conti-O'Hare (2002) suggests that transcendence and transformation are interconnected concepts because they describe both an ability to move beyond one's circumstances and achieve a heightened level of personal development, a notion also reflected by Olson (1997) as a broadened perspective and sense of meaning. Byock (1997) contends that transcendence involves a sense of inner expansion and a deepened sense of "connection to a whole that is elemental and absolute" (p. 235); to achieve transcendence, one must develop a new spiritual self-identity to replace one's former worldly persona and shift one's perspective to spiritual concerns. Moody and Arcangel

(2001) refer to transcendence as a spiritual rebirth because individuals 'leave behind' aspects of their former lives to assume new personality characteristics, such as changed core values, beliefs, and ideals, and a broader life perspective, a sentiment echoed by Brehony (2000). Individuals are able to rise above their former selves and become stronger, wiser, more loving, compassionate, and appreciative of life. To 'rise above', or transcend, loss is to be "metaphorically lifted up, to have an aerial view and thereby gain a new perspective", according to Prend (1997, p. 85). The following examples reflect, primarily, existential transcendence, although some examples of metaphysical transcendence are also evident in these and other of the participants' accounts.

Carrie describes her resolution of the many unanswered questions surrounding the deaths of her loved ones as she learned to tolerate uncertainty.

> I still *don't know why* my uncle committed suicide or why people thought he would never get into heaven. I *never did get any answers* to my questions then…or about my husband's death…*but I realize now that there are many paths* to God, not just one route. You don't have to belong to a particular church…not everyone will find God the same way. So my experiences have really broadened my beliefs…and my faith and trust. Even though I *don't always get answers* to why things happen, I know God is there. So things are finally getting better. I'm happier and *I know I can go on.*

Despite the uncertainty inherent in her cancer diagnosis, June describes her sense of 'wholeness' and ability to carry on and move beyond her present circumstances.

> I knew when God gave me that [prophesy] that, for sure, it was a definite indication that *I was to go forward with my life...I've never had confirmation that the cancer has been healed, but I have been made 'whole'...* I have no fear of death at all anymore because I know where I'm going and I'm ready whenever He wants to call me home.

Amanda, too, spoke of her ability to continue with life after her loss.

> When I lost Daniel, I felt like I had lost everything because there was nothing at that point that seemed valuable enough to move me forward…If God can see me through that, I know there's someone pretty powerful in control…and God has helped me to get through so many difficult situations – He helped me *to leave the rubbish behind.* He provides healing…and *then I can move forward* and *I become more 'whole'.*

Hannah related her ability to 'move forward', with the assistance and spiritual power of God, and stated that, although her abuse had caused some major personal damage, it had also shaped who she has become.

> I'm not consumed with anger towards him [brother] any longer…I had to *move beyond those events*…to succeed in life and to demonstrate to myself that he did not destroy me. I know there is a huge spiritual resource out there…a power that is available to all of us. I can't understand it but I know it exists…and it's that same power, that same *Spirit within me*, that moves me from being a victim of childhood abuse and rape to a *survivor*…and maybe even beyond survivor…to *thriver*, if that's even a word. It is *Spirit* that gives me the ability to *rise above these circumstances* and to recognize that the spiritual realm is bigger than all of this…and it's eternal.

While transcendence may be confined to interpersonal relationships or to relationships with the natural world and may, therefore, be considered existential in nature, it may also include intra- and transpersonal relationships with the Divine and may, therefore, also be seen as metaphysical in nature. Grace described being "in a different consciousness" just prior to her husband's death.

> That time with my husband was absolutely *within spirit*…it was a very spiritual time…and when he died in my arms, that was a very spiritual experience. I felt as if I was *out of my body* and in a *different consciousness*…it was a very beautiful closure of our life together.

Anne also described a state of metaphysical transcendence in her comment that:

> Sometimes, when I feel really close to God, nothing else matters, *everything else just disappears.* At those times, I am often basking in the sunlight, *alone with God…united with God*…in total peace and silence…absolute silence…*and I am 'at One' with God.*

Transcendent experiences were not confined simply to movement beyond traumatic events but were also evident in happier circumstances. Both Grace and Lynn found that childbirth precipitated transcendence, particularly since the pregnancies were unanticipated and not expected to reach term. Grace described her experience in the following excerpt.

> When my youngest daughter was born, that was really one of the *peak moments* of my life…I had never felt such *peace.* I had hoped for a girl because the baby I lost was a girl…and the moment I heard her cry, I felt *total, positive elation*, and an overwhelming *sense of love and joy and co-creation with God.*

It was also precisely at the moment of birth that Lynn realized there was *"a Creator who loved [me]"* and that her life could be 'other' that it was. It was at that point that Lynn determined she *"[would] never go back"* to her previous lifestyle and began to actively seek to learn new ways of coping and to surround herself with individuals who would support her decision to change and move forward with her life.

Transcendent experiences, described by Maslow (1969) as 'peak moments', can only be achieved if one possesses a high level of insight, self-awareness, and consciousness; only then is one able to fully accept and embrace all past experiences with equanimity, while simultaneously surrendering the negative emotions associated with such events. The expanded consciousness that is characteristic of peak moments frequently leads to an experience of unity with the greater cosmos, a feeling of timelessness, and a sense of overall well-being. Maslow thus views transcendence as one aspect of self-actualization. McColman (1997) states that various types of extraordinary "peak" experiences are described within most major religious traditions, yet all reflect "moments of brilliant insight" after which "something will have changed" (p. 215). The insight gained from such a transcendent experience is revealed by subsequent changes in an individual's attitude and/or behaviours.

> The theological term for this insight-driven change is *metanoia*. Like the sun bursting from behind the clouds in a glorious rush of morning light, the moment of metanoia ("conversion") suddenly casts everything in a new light, and what formerly was hidden suddenly becomes impossible to miss…The spiritual life brings metanoia over and over again. Life is a process filled with change; to grow spiritually is to be transformed continuously. (McColman, 1997, p. 215)

Transcendence, then, involves a decision to incorporate unavoidable trauma and loss into one's life and to use the knowledge gained to transform one's life in a way that is devoid of bitterness and that focuses on compassionate relationships with others and/or with God (god). Prend (1997) emphasizes that transcendence can only be achieved over time with the gradual change of one's fundamental worldview and an increase in interpersonal connections. Olson (1997), however, suggests that, although transcendence is a consequence of expanding one's personal boundaries and, therefore, generally occurs over time, it may also, occasionally, occur rapidly, in a moment of intense spiritual experience.

Reed employs Roger's science of unitary human beings as the foundation for her definition of transcendence as an expansion of personal boundaries inwardly, outwardly, and temporally (Coward & Reed, 1996). Introspection and increased self-awareness are at the center of inward boundary expansion, while outward boundaries are expanded through the formation of interpersonal and environmental relationships. The integration of one's perspectives of past and future aspects of life as a means of enhancing one's present perspective forms the basis of temporal boundary expansion and, together, reflect Roger's concept of health as pandimensional human 'being'. Consequently, as an expansion of personal boundaries, or self-integration, transcendence must be considered a critical factor in the development of personal well-being and for the promotion of health and healing. Coward and Reed (1996) consider self-transcendence, or the ability to move beyond one's personal concerns and take a broader perspective of life, to be a developmental resource for healing. These authors distinguish healing from curing on the basis of dictionary definitions of meaning. They state that healing is an *internal* process of overcoming adversity and restoring personal integrity, while curing is an *external* process that requires some agent to eliminate or ameliorate harm. This distinction between healing and curing is evident in June's comments and reflects her transcendence of adversity.

> When I prayed for healing [with the elders] that day, I thought, obviously, that it would be the healing of the cancer...but what it turned out to be was a *healing of June...and her soul...and all of her fears.* I've never had any confirmation that the cancer has been healed but *I have been made 'whole'.*

Healing, then, according to Coward and Reed (1996) is related to a sense of wholeness, balance, and integration, an intensified realization of inner self-awareness, that leads to an overall sense of well-being, even in the midst of serious, life-threatening, or terminal illness. In this sense, disease becomes an opportunity for re-evaluating one's life, broadening one's perspective, restoring one's relationships, and changing one's direction in life, thereby achieving self-transcendence.

Transcendence was also frequently linked with mystery in the literature and considered by many to be a *response* to mystery (Burkhardt , 1989; Peck, 1993; Reed, 1992) that involved a sense of union with, or participation in, the greater universe (Byock, 1997; Fallding, 1979; Maslow, 1969). Barnum (1996) refers to transcendence, in the mode described by Maslow, as "mystical experience[s]" (p. 46), or as ecstatic experiences that involve qualitative changes in perception and an intensification of any sensory experience. As heightened sensory awareness, transcendence can be viewed in terms of "transient moments of self-actualization" (p. 53), as have been previously illustrated by participants' descriptions of unexplainable experiences of mystery. Labun (1988) indicates that experiences of mystery are expressions of the Spirit that serve to provide a sense of peace, wonder, and fulfillment, and Savramis (1979) suggests that mystery is also implied in Tillich's definition of faith as an experience of being captured or grasped by the object of one's ultimate concern. Transcendence, in this sense, is an experience of mystical communion that extends the boundaries of self, dissolves time, enhances relationships, facilitates self-actualization, and fosters a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

A review of the aforenoted literature suggests that the majority of the authors hold that transcendence involves a broadening of one's life perspective and encompasses elements of connectedness and personal transformation. Transcendent experiences often occur in response to emotionally charged events, such as those described by the women in this study, and frequently engender intense feelings, such as awe, reverence, hate, fear, love, or peace. It is also clear that transcendence may be either existential or metaphysical in nature, or may include elements of both. On a purely existential plane, transcendence appears to require the passage of time for integration to occur, whereas metaphysical transcendence implies momentary transport to another level of consciousness and involves a sense of timelessness. Characteristics of both existential and metaphysical transcendence were clearly evident in participants' accounts of 'awakening', 'surrendering', and 'experiencing mystery', as previously stated, and may have been precipitant factors in the choices made by individuals as they reached their 'turning points' and were able to 'recognize 'Other''.

Theme Six: Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation

We create ourselves. The sequence is suffering, insight, will, action, change.
Allen Wheelis

Each participant described transformational changes in herself and a re-creation of her 'self' identity in the wake of existential crisis and attributed the on-going self-evolution to a spiritual process. Most women stated that they were "better" people because of their experiences and that the experiences were for their "own good", although they would have preferred *not* to have had the experiences. Several women, retrospectively ascribed meaning to particular events that they saw as 'preparatory' to the crisis and personal change that was to follow, as previously illustrated. The re-creation of 'Self', as a response to suffering and adversity, was manifested through a variety of attitudinal and behavioural alterations that clearly reflected considerable change at the most elemental level, or core structure, of each woman's 'being'. Transformative changes included the development of greater sensitivity and empathy for others and an ability to forgive those who had intentionally or accidentally inflicted suffering, an appreciation for life and a 'zest' for living, a sense of peace, joy, and contentment with life, a willingness to trust one's future to God (however defined), greater love for all of creation, an attitude of service to others, and a new-found sense of self-confidence and self-reliance.

The word 'transformation' is etymologically derived from the Old French *transformer* and the Latin *transformare* meaning to change in form, appearance, or structure; to metamorphose; to dramatically change in condition, nature, or character (Onions, 1998; Pearsall & Trumble, 1996; Urdang, 1980). Transformation implies a fundamental change at the most basic structural level of human 'being' and is a process that occurs over an extended period of time in response to either induced or spontaneous forces. The re-creative essence of transformation is clearly reflected in the dramatic personal changes described by the women in this investigation.

Singh (1998) suggests that Western psychological and spiritual philosophies are based on a model of alchemy that embodies regeneration as its central theme. Regeneration is accomplished through the psychic deconstruction or disintegration of suffering and a subsequent psychospiritual reconstruction. Yet, the same concept, that of purgation, appears to be universal in its scope, as is evident in the following example of Eastern philosophy.

> Particularly in the Christian mystical tradition, new life is seen as coming from the Holy Spirit as God cleanses, transforms, and graces. In that tradition, purgation is a dominant motif. This pattern can be translated into contemporary terms. What in the Christian mystical tradition is termed "purgation" is, quite simply, the passage through the transformative fields of the Sufi cartography – Experience, Empty Mind, and Wisdom. It is that level or gradation of existence and consciousness where what is inessential is burned off. What is inessential is burned off precisely in the act of acknowledging and experiencing it. It is a refining process. (p. 106)

In both Western and Eastern mystical traditions, character development as a response to suffering is allegorical to the alchemical process of purification through fire, wherein the dross is burned away leaving only refined 'gold' as the product of the transformative process.

Self-Confidence, Self-Reliance, and a Sense of Control

As each participant began to change and transform spiritually, she developed a new sense of self-confidence and independence that led to feelings of competence and a belief that she could handle the challenges inherent in facing an uncertain future. Paradoxically, once each participant was able to relinquish control, admit personal vulnerability, and surrender to a power beyond the self, she was able to regain a sense of control over her life in partnership with God (however defined). Grace stated that she began to "stand up for [myself]" and to "feel [my] worth as a person", something she had been unable to do in her first marriage; a short time later, she made the decision to find a job and begin to support herself rather than to rely on her family financially. Hannah made a decision to return to school when she too began to develop a sense of self-worth and self-confidence.

> I've decided to go back to school this fall…I've wanted to do it for a long time but I've never had the courage before…or the belief that I *could* do it. I definitely *believe in myself* now and I do *believe that I can do it*. I want to find out what I was designed to do with my life and *I'm certainly a lot more confident*…I *know* I can succeed now. I have finally been able to *take some control of my life*, together with God. I have become a *participant* in my life, rather than just being sort of a passive *observer*. I'm no longer a lost wanderer just waiting for events to happen *to* me. I can finally *be* who I am because I *know* who I am.

June, also, described new feelings of confidence and ability after her journey through cancer.

> Very, very gradually, I was able to take *a little bit more control over some parts of my life*. I started getting asked to speak to various groups about my experiences and my faith…and I realize now that *confidence was part of my healing*. I only have a grade nine education, but I was not intimidated even though I was going to speak to these well-educated people. That's when I recognized *how much I had changed…and was changing*. I had developed so much more faith and trust in God. *I started to feel confident* about my life…about my faith…about my relationship with God…about myself. I realized that God had fulfilled me in many ways I had not expected and He was transforming me and renewing me daily.

Lynn stated that she made many changes in her lifestyle when she gave up drugs and prostitution and became pregnant.

> I started to believe that my life could be different and I thought, "maybe I *can* do this". I *started to believe in myself* and then I was able to get clean….Then, having my son really changed my life. I started reading books and going to see this nutritionist because *I had to make sure that I would be able to look after myself and my kid*, eh? I started doing things I would never have done before. I found that I did things to take care of myself *for him*, you know? I had to learn to do all these things…for myself and this kid…that's when *I really started to change*. I just kept thinking, I have to learn to do these things because God gave me this kid…and I realized it's not up to my husband to take care of me…*it's up to me*…so now *I'm a lot more independent* and I *know I can look after myself and my kids*.

It is common for individuals who have encountered and overcome adversity to develop increased confidence and a renewed sense of competence and self-reliance, according to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). The ability to transcend one's circumstances by investing experience with meaning necessarily infuses one with confidence, says Fallding (1979). Neeld (1997) suggests that it is important in redefining one's life to focus on one's own abilities rather than to rely on the advice or counsel of others when determining future plans. Regaining a sense of control by developing or renewing an intimate relationship with God (however defined) is one outcome of spiritual growth that promotes self-reliance. The ability to tackle difficult life circumstances, in concert with a greater power, often enabled participants to develop a belief in their ability to handle other challenges successfully. Frequently, as illustrated by their descriptions, individuals demonstrated greater self-confidence, express feelings of increased wisdom and of being 'better' people as a function of their experience. Self-reliance, then, paradoxically arises from one's admission of vulnerability and sense of lack of control over life.

Peace, Love, and Contentment

Most of the participants described feeling infused with peace, love, and contentment with their lives as they began to change and develop spiritually. Feelings of peace and love recurred frequently, although they were not a constant presence in daily life; nevertheless, such sensations had a profound and lasting effect on each woman's life. Anne described the sense of peace, love, and contentment that she experienced for the first time immediately after her baptism.

> I had this *intense feeling of peace*…a kind of peace that you just can't describe. I have experienced that same feeling of *peace and love* many times since then…it's not always continuous…but often that *sense of contentment with life* and *joy* and *love* and *peace*. I have real *peace within me* and a *sense of direction* in my life knowing that God is always with me…and in control.

June recalled the feeling of satisfaction she developed as she began to work with others in a volunteer capacity, noting:

> I became involved with palliative care visits and that was difficult but very *rewarding*. I received affirmation after affirmation that I was *doing what I was supposed to be doing* and it provided me with a great deal of *satisfaction* and *peace* in my life.

Anne said that whenever she thinks about her relationship with God she begins to feel a renewed sense of peace, love, and gratitude for her life.

> I just have such an *inner peace*…a *peacefulness* and such *thankfulness* for my life. *I feel so cared about* and I have such feelings of *happiness, contentment, peace, security, love*…and I know that *all is as it should be*, despite what's happening around me.

Lynn described being overwhelmed with feelings of peace and love immediately following the birth of her son.

> Right away, I remember feeling…just this *love*…and *warmth*. It was the most intense moment I've ever had – *I could really feel God's love – and it really changed me*. I have a pretty *positive attitude about life* now, and knowing my Creator loves me and is right here in my heart whenever I need Him gives me *a real sense of peace*.

After experiencing mystery in the form of 'laying on of hands' and the 'gift of tongues', which she stated was "life-changing", Gloria described her feelings with the expression "the *peace that passes all understanding*" and says that she has experienced "that *same peace* many times since". Amanda described a similar feeling in her statement that she was given "a gift of faith….and a *peace* [I] just couldn't explain". When Anne was able to forgive her husband for his infidelity, she stated:

> I was able to move anger and hatred to…a *loving* feeling…a *peace*…and *contentment*…a *softness*. I felt this intense *peacefulness*…and a *gentleness* inside me and, after that, I knew I'd be okay.

Love was also a potent emotion expressed by all of the participants when describing the changes in 'self' that had occurred in response to spiritual experiences. According to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002), "love is the essential connection between heart and mind" (p. 73); it is both expressed and experienced through relationships and is the ground of 'being', the source of wholeness, the energy of life, and the mechanism of healing. Love is the cornerstone of human 'being' that enables individuals to develop a sense of awe and reverence at the mystery of the universe and to experience and express joy and gratitude in life. Whitfield (1995) suggests that unconditional love, such as the love described by the forenamed participants, forms the authentic 'self', "the power within our core that affirms and values another person rather than the ideal our egos would like them to be" (p. 163). Such love is characterized by empathy, sensitivity, and compassion, regardless of whether it is bestowed by God (god) *on* individuals or bestowed *by* individuals on others. It is a product of introspection and increased self-awareness that flows from a sense of reverence for and interconnectedness with all life. Whitman further asserts:

> Love is the inner God who opens our blind eyes to the beauty, value and quality of the other person. Love causes us to value that person as a total, individual self, and this means that we accept the negative side as well as the positive, the imperfections as well as the admirable qualities. When one truly loves the other human being rather than the projection, one loves and accepts the other person's totality. (p. 163)

Love, peace, a sense of gratitude for one's life, and the desire to provide service to others were all evident outcomes of the spiritual transformation experienced by each of the participants. The love *experienced* by the participants in this study reflects a *felt* personal relationship with God (god) and a sense of unconditional acceptance *in spite of* their personal flaws and imperfections of character. Unconditional love is unmerited and without expectation and is, therefore, often felt as *grace*, according to Fish & Shelly (1978). However, love was also *expressed* by participants, as previously illustrated, in relationships with others and in acts of compassion and forgiveness.

The ability to see the Divine in others, as expressed by Grace and Amanda, and to feel love, gratitude, and a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence for life was often demonstrated by the desire to serve or minister to others. Amanda described her need to develop an "attitude of service" in her performance of tasks and responsibilities affecting others, while Carrie, Lynn, and Marjorie reflected on their changed attitudes to others. June, Grace, and Marjorie engaged in volunteer activities and developed ministries of service to others as they began to grow spiritually. Foster (1978) indicates that empathy and compassion engender humility and form the foundation of service. Within the Christian tradition, to which all participants were exposed, submission and servitude are attitudes that reflect an individual's personal relationship with the Divine and are, thus, characteristics to be carefully cultivated as developmental aspects of one's spiritual journey (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Carson, 1989; Foster, 1978; Whitfield, 1995). Carson (1989) maintains that it is "an awareness of the innate value of others, and in fact of all of creation, that directs the individual back to others in acts of service, charity, and good works" (p. 46). Whitfield (1995) states that the propensity for service arises from a desire to express love for and develop intimate connections with other human beings and with God (god). Indeed, altruism is a critical element of the teachings of most spiritual traditions and is demonstrated through humility and service to others. According to Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002), "when we connect with another or others from our spirit, we share in communion, foster community, and help to make Love more manifest in our world" (p. 280). The feelings of peace, love, and personal contentment with life expressed by participants, as well as the desire to serve others, are entirely consistent with the descriptions of spiritual outcomes identified from the literature and reveal the transformative power of spiritual experience.

Compassion and Forgiveness

Compassion and forgiveness proved to be central to personal transformation in this phase of spiritual development and were described by participants in a variety of ways, including greater understanding and acceptance of others, 'letting go' of hurts, empathy, and increased sensitivity towards others. The word compassion means to empathize with or feel deep sympathy for the misfortune or suffering of another and is accompanied by the inclination or desire to alleviate pain or remove its cause (Onions, 1998; Pearsall & Trumble, 1996; Urdang, 1980); it is "suffering with" another individual (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Young-Eisendrath, 1996). To feel compassion is to embrace the circumstances and feelings of another and incorporate his/her hurt into one's own being and personal history, states Fischer (1990). As such, compassion requires imagination because one must, metaphorically, 'enter into' the other person's life. Compassion arises from a sense of personal vulnerability and shared humanity that permits one to recognize inequality and to see and respond to the suffering of others.

> It is the descent into hell that permits compassion to arise…It is…the real and actual distress [of another] that's shared and recognized in compassion…It is fundamentally about sharing the limitations of human life and feeling the connection to others through pain and suffering. (Young-Eisendrath, 1996, p. 42)

Brehony (2000) and Moody and Arcangel (2001) view increased compassion and a sense of gratitude in life as outcomes of 'self' transcendence, the achievement of which depends on the acquisition of new insights, increased self-awareness, and a change in one's perspective of life. Greater sensitivity to others' needs and feelings breeds compassion and facilitates the positive development of social relationships, according to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), especially when one has also personally experienced suffering and adversity. Consequently, compassion is key to the development of community and to one's ability to forgive others.

According to Foster (1978), increased sensitivity to others, empathy, and compassion may be antecedent to *and* subsequently developed from forgiveness. Compassion and forgiveness arise from attentiveness to one's relationship with the Divine and a willingness to reflect upon and change one's fundamental nature in response to the increased 'self'-knowledge acquired through the relational process. Forgiveness is central to spiritual growth because it is central to the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Without forgiveness, relationships often become strained and distant, fracturing one's sense of harmony, connectedness, and integration with God (however defined) and the universe.

Forgiveness comes from the Old English *forgiefan* meaning to give completely; it is the act of granting free pardon for or remitting an offense, debt, or claim owed one and, as such, must be considered a gift (Onions, 1998; Pearsall & Trumble, 1996; Urdang, 1980). Forgiveness is a deliberate disposition to 'let go' of anger and resentment towards others in response to personal injury, even when the perpetrator of the injury has not expressed any remorse. Forgiveness is bestowed voluntarily and accompanied by heightened sensitivity and compassion. McColman (1997) emphasizes that forgiveness does not involve 'giving up' anything, it merely increases one's capacity to 'receive' love and affection. By voluntarily relinquishing the anger and resentment that inhere a sense of victimization, one regains the power usurped by the perpetrator and is freed from the past. It is through forgiveness that the possibility of reconciliation between individuals, restoration of relationships, and reconnection to the greater whole arises (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Borysenko, 1993; Fish & Shelly, 1978; Foster, 1978; Longaker, 1997; McColman, 1997; Romney, 1999; Whitfield, 1995).

Romney (1999) suggests that forgiveness releases one from pain and opens one to love, peace, and joy. He views forgiveness as 'three-pronged', involving forgiveness of others, forgiveness of self, and forgiveness of God (god). Because holding onto anger and resentment leads to bitterness, distress, and eventually to self *dis*-integration, the ability to forgive may be seen as a gift to oneself as well as to others. Borysenko (1993) and Longaker (1997) maintain that individuals become enslaved *to* others by standing in judgment *of* others and emphasize that forgiveness is a means of breaking the bonds of power granted to the other and thereby gaining freedom. Individuals must also be able to forgive themselves for self-inflicted pain, as well as for pain that has been intentionally or unintentionally inflicted on others so that self-hatred can be avoided and sensitivity, empathy, and compassion developed (Borysenko, 1993; Longaker, 1997; Romney, 1999). Finally, forgiveness may also need to be extended to God (god) by some for any perceived failure on God's (god's) part to ameliorate suffering or intervene benevolently in an individual's life circumstances (Romney, 1999). The will to forgive is thus at the heart of relationship development and healing of the self.

Lynn stated that she "can *relate to other people better* now and be *concerned for them* because [I've] 'been there' and can remember what [I] was like then". Acknowledging that she has 'been there' herself demonstrates Lynn's awareness that all individuals are prone to mistakes and are, therefore, interrelated by virtue of a shared human nature. In her work with local high school girls, June says she has developed "a great *sensitivity* to the girls and their needs". Hannah stated:

> I'm a *more sensitive* person now and I'm more able to have *empathy* and *compassion* for others who are going through difficult things because I've been through difficult things myself.

Amanda describes the development of increased sensitivity towards others in the following comment.

> I don't feel so much 'done to' by others anymore…*I just don't personalize slights so much.* Without God in my life, I know I'd be doing selfish things that could hurt those around me…knowing this really helps to *soften me and helps me understand others' behaviours* more…knowing we all have a sinful nature and are naturally selfish has really *made me more generous in my appraisal of others*.

Carrie indicated that heightened sensitivity and a willingness to forgive others was important for building relationships.

> I'm *more accepting of other people* now. I just *refuse to hold anger against another person for slighting me…*because inadvertently, I might have said or done something to hurt someone else, too…and if I let little things offend me, it could keep me from building relationships and then I'm not much of an example to anyone.

Perhaps this increased sensitivity to others developed because participants were able to recognize both the humanity and divinity of 'other' and, thereby, the interconnectedness of all life. Marjorie described her attempts to redirect any hurts from others by focusing on the example of behaviour provided by Christ.

> In trying to identify with Christ's suffering, I try to *take the focus off myself* and direct it toward Him…so, whenever I am hurt by others, I turn to Him and remember that He was hurt by others, too. In that way, *I won't take offence.* I look to Jesus and *let go of my hurt.*

Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that, "As an act of love, forgiveness is a way of extending compassion to ourselves and others, acknowledging that which separates and that which connects us" (p. 66). As such, forgiveness is essential for the healing of 'self' and re-integration into life after trauma.

Lynn recalled her ability to forgive her mother and her abuser in terms of acceptance and expanded self-awareness in the following statement.

> For a couple of years I went for counseling with some other women who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse, too, and I remember dealing with my own childhood and *accepting what had happened…*and I remember thinking, 'okay – she was drunk…he was drunk… *that's where they were at the time*, you know? Maybe they didn't do everything right, you know…but then *I didn't do everything great, either.* Even if I had been born into a perfect family, things might not really have been that much different.

Amanda, too, revealed increased understanding and acceptance of her parents' behaviours as a result of reflection and the development of self-awareness.

> For a long time I really blamed my parents for all my flaws…but I have been given such an *incredible love for my parents…*and *I don't feel that's part of my relationship with them anymore. I know they did their best with what they had,* so now I just love them and *let go of those feelings* because I know if I use them as an excuse, I won't grow spiritually.

Anne revealed the upheaval she felt while trying to forgive her husband and the feeling of peace she experienced as she let go of her anger and hatred.

> At the time, I really did not want to forgive him but, somehow, *I was able to forgive.* For a while, we had fought and screamed at each other and lashed out…hurt each other. And I

> remember laying in bed one night thinking, "Lord, I hate him with such a passion…I hate what he's done to our marriage…but, if we're to go on, to get beyond this, I have to learn to forgive…and I can't right now. So, if this is what You want, You will have to change me…to allow my heart to do that". And it was like…*this warm feeling just washed over me, erasing the pain*…just *instantly taking it away*. 'Poof…it was gone'…and I remember rolling over and saying that, even though we had a lot to work through, I thought *I could forgive him*. I just had this *peace* wash over me and the *anger and bitterness and hatred were taken from my heart*…they just disappeared…and *I was able to forgive him.*

Finally, Hannah said she was able to forgive her brother for the abuse she suffered by separating forgiveness and forgetting on her spiritual journey.

> Because of my own spiritual growth, *I have been able to forgive my brother for what he did to me.* I cannot forget…because of the incredible pain and suffering it caused…but I can separate forgiveness from forgetting. I can't forget the act, but *I have forgiven the person.*

The separation of forgiveness from forgetting is an important distinction for understanding the conceptual nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness does not involve absolving another of liability or condoning irresponsible, hurtful actions but is an *act of the will*. As such, forgiveness is a *choice*, a deliberate decision to relinquish intense emotions that prevent one from moving beyond painful circumstances. The inability to forgive others can keep individuals trapped in the past and preclude healing in the present (Borysenko, 1993; Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Longaker, 1997; McColman, 1997; Neeld, 1997; Romney, 1999; Whitfield, 1995). With forgiveness, the energy devoted to negative emotions can be re-directed toward healing and transcendence, regardless of one's memory of past events.

Joy, 'Zest', and Appreciation for Life

Joy, a zest for living, and an appreciation for life or sense of gratitude were also apparent in the accounts of personal change described by participants. A sense of vibrancy and energy was almost palpable in some of the women's comments and revealed a sense of wonder and reverence for life that was previously missing. Lynn no longer contemplates suicide and *looks forward to the future* with hope and anticipation.

> I'm *excited about life* now…I don't want to die anymore. *I want to live*…to see my children grow up. I want to be a grandparent. I want to *do stuff* and to keep *enjoying life* with my kids. I actually think I've become a little feistier in the last few years because I know who I am now…and *I'm very grateful for my life.*

Amanda echoed similar sentiments about the *joy* in her life as a result of her spiritual awakening.

> When I began to rely on God's power in my life, I experienced a *peace* and assurance of His presence…and *I had a great joy come into my life*. That sense of joy is rock solid and helps provide some *balance* in my life. I feel so *vibrant* now, especially when I talk about my relationship with the Lord. He has given me such an *openness* and *intensity…a real joy and zest and appreciation for my life.*

Marjorie revealed the sense of *enthusiasm and joy* that is now a part of her life.

> As a child of God I feel so loved…there's a feeling of *joy* in my life…I mean, *real exuberance…and zeal…and a sense of well-being.* I don't know where God begins and I end, but my experiences have *allowed my spirit to come alive*. I have an awareness of my spirit as *fully alive* under God…*full of zest, zeal, love, fervency, and joy…exuberance…and a sense of overall well-being.*

Hannah described the intense feeling of enjoyment that has developed in her life.

> I'm still finding out about myself…it's an ongoing process of discovering who I am…and it has provided me with *a physical energy, an emotional energy, and a spiritual energy…* a kind of *internal strength* I didn't know I had…and I have learned to really *enjoy and appreciate life*. I have a *joy* in my life and a sense of *being alive* that was missing before.

Anne, too, felt a sense of gratefulness and joy as she began her spiritual transformation.

> I have such a feeling of *joy* inside me now…I have a sense of real *happiness* and *joy* that I can hardly describe and I am so *thankful for my life*.

A further exemplar of personal change can be found in Gloria's narrative and provides a summary of the many changes experienced by the women in this investigation.

> I think that the whole *process of spiritual change* I experienced began the day I heard the so-called 'bad' news. I *felt* there was a distinct *change in my attitude* at that time, but I *really* noticed the changes after I got home. I'd given a lot of thought to all of this while I was in the hospital, but that's a different kind of routine. When I got home, I started to see that there had been some big changes. There were lots of other things related to the surgery happening in my life during that time but I noticed some real changes in *me*. My *attitude* towards all my family members changed…I grew *more loving*. I *felt* it, in myself, that I should be *more loving, caring, forgiving, and concerned* for all my kids and grandkids. My husband and I became *much closer*. I became a *softer* person…and not quite so critical because I realized that life could end at any moment. I became very aware of the fact that life *could* have ended…it didn't, but it *could have*. I became very much more aware what *life* is and how to use it better because it can come to an end at any time. I became *aware that the days were very precious*…I felt almost like I'd been given my life back again. I became very aware of being *alive* and *very grateful* for every day I woke up. Life took on a whole, very different outlook…it became much more precious to me. I was just very *appreciative and grateful for every day.*

Whitfield (1995) suggests that Divine energy permeates life and connects individuals to their experiences, to each other, and to God (however defined) through a "dance of energies" (p. 127).

> To embrace this dance, to see the divine in everything, is to become vulnerable to the flows of feelings created by this energy, feelings that are quite non-rational and can create complete peace and ecstatic joy when we finally let go into the harmony. (p. 127)

Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) state that a sense of gratitude is the natural response to an individual's awareness of life as a gift that cannot be taken for granted. Having faced one's mortality and lost the illusion of invulnerability, many individuals come to the realization that life is precious and must be fully appreciated on a daily basis; consequently, they develop an attitude of gratitude and a sense of satisfaction with the fullness of their lives, including both the positive and negative aspects of experience (Heriot, 1992; Hungelmann et al., 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Byrne (1985) refers to such an appreciation for life as the development of renewed energy and a 'zest' for living. Gratefulness infuses living with vivacity and disintegrates boundaries, thereby fostering a sense of interconnectedness and interdependence with all other elements of life. According to Steindl-Rast (as cited in Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002), "gratefulness is a measure of our aliveness, our ability to live life open to surprise in spite of the suffering and dying that living implies" (p. 72).

Spiritual Metamorphosis as a Developmental Process

All of the participants described their spiritual development in terms of a personal journey of self-discovery or as an ongoing process of change. In the wake of her spiritual awakening, Amanda stated that she "began a *gradual growing process*" and now knows that "no matter how bad things look, they're in a *process of becoming* good". Anne described her "spiritual *journey*" as a "*long slow process of growth and change*" with many "ups and downs". Grace, too, said that there was "no big bang…*just a gradually unfolding process of discovering my spiritual self*". The evolutionary nature of spiritual growth is evident in the following comment made by June.

> It was a *gradual process of change*…nothing was instantaneous. I didn't realize for some time that God was hearing my prayers because I wasn't seeing answers right away, but God doesn't always reveal Himself instantly…it's a *process*. God was working *a magnificent process* in my life that I can see so clearly *now*. Even mid-way through my experience, I hadn't realized how much He had done and was doing…but the growth now is truly amazing. God has shown me that this is a *process*…He is renewing me day by day and *constantly creating in me the person He wants me to be* in spite of the cancer.

The recognition of spiritual transformation as a developmental process was only apparent upon retrospective reflection by the participants, as illustrated above and in the following statement of Hannah's:

> I think that my spiritual growth has been primarily a *process of change*. It's been something that has *evolved*. I don't think I really understood that it was a *process* until I looked back over the past six or eight years…now I can see that all the changes have been part of *a long, slow process*.

According to Taylor (2002), the search for meaning that is often initiated in response to serious health challenges is evident in numerous research findings and is best described as a process or journey. Although spiritual potential may be innate from birth, its actualization requires personal maturation and the passage of time and must, therefore, be considered a developmental process, emphasize Haase, Britt, Coward, Leidy, and Penn (1992). Marjorie, also, describes her spiritual development and realization of 'self' identity as a "*healing process*" that involved a "*process* of change" that "*took time*" to achieve. Burkhardt and Nagai-Jacobson (2002) echo the view that the spiritual journey is a path of healing that requires time for reflection and the development of self-awareness and sensitivity to one's social environment.

Within the body of extant literature, spiritual development has been termed a journey of self-exploration and discovery (Carson, 1989; Keegan, 1994; Taylor & Ferszt, 1990; Webster, 1994), an unfolding journey (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 1994, 2002), an inward journey (James & James, 1991), and a developmental process of increasing awareness that occurs over time (Brewer, 1979; Burkardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Carson, 1989; Wright & Sayre-Adams, 2000). Carson (1989) states that spiritual growth involves a bi-directional process that includes horizontal and vertical elements of change. The vertical process involves development of a closer relationship with God or a higher being, while the horizontal process involves recognition of the transcendent values found in interpersonal and environmental relationships.

Although a spiritual journey may begin spontaneously, as a gradual increase in spiritual self-awareness, or as the result of existential crisis, as in the case of participants in this study, it often involves experiences of mystery and/or transcendence. In either case, spiritual maturation occurs through a process of reflective contemplation and ascription of meaning to life experiences (Brooke, 1987; Carson, 1989; Donley, 1991; Flynn, as cited in Walker, 1992; Heliker, 1992; Labun, 1988; Reed, 1991; Stoll, 1989; Trice, 1990). Wright and Sayre-Adams (2000) claim that, although the spiritual journey may involve a period of retreat *from* the world for purposes of reflection, introspection, and self-exploration, it also requires compassionate participation *in* the world through relationships. Regardless of whether the initial recognition of 'Other' happened unexpectedly and instantaneously, or as a gradually increasing awareness of possibilities, spiritual growth and transformation required a lengthy period of time for the developmental changes to occur. The foregoing descriptions of spiritual transformation as a developmental process that were provided by the participants are consistent with the conceptualizations identified in nursing and allied health literature related to spirituality.

Living in Equipoise

A review of the various themes and sub-themes that constitute the re-integrative phase of spiritual experience revealed a number of characteristics that appeared to be polar opposites, yet they were all clearly evident throughout the participants' experiential accounts. Although these attributes may appear at first to be paradoxical, in that the expression of one would seem to preclude the other, there is, in fact, a 'space between', a necessary tension that is created by the competing extremes. Examples of polarities identified from within participant narratives include solitude and community, independence and interdependence, silence and presence, surrender and control, vulnerability and self-reliance, mystery and practicality, 'self'-interest and service to others, and immanence and transcendence.

Within the literature surveyed, it became apparent that several authors have identified some of the same, or similar, polarities that were evident in the accounts of participants (Fischer, 1990; Foster, 1978; McColman, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Whitfield, 1995). These authors have alluded to a need for maintaining a dynamic balance between such competing needs that implies living in the tension, or 'space between', the opposing demands, a notion that McColman (1997) describes as *equipoise* and that Whitfield (1995) refers to as a process of attempting to "unite the opposites" (p. 46). The word *equipoise* means "an equal distribution of weight; even balance; a counterpoise" (Pearsall & Trumble, 1996; Urdang, 1980; Webster, 1989); it implies holism and unity. Like the Chinese symbol for yin and yang, to live in equipoise is to exist in a balanced 'whole', a harmony of opposites. When applied to the aforementioned polarities, to live in equipoise requires the continual balancing and re-balancing of personal needs. According to McColman,

> To live in equipoise is to live in a dynamic, "poised" balance between the two aspects of a polarity. Spiritual equipoise is the quality of taking care of two needs that may seem to be at odds with each other, recognizing that these needs may make different demands on us at different times and that both are important. Equipoise may mean emphasizing one need at one point and then another need at another point. (p. 149)

The following examples illustrate the continuous process of re-balancing opposing needs that is characteristic of spiritual equipoise and metamorphosis. Although solitude is essential for spiritual regeneration and attendance to the Divine, human beings live their existence within a nexus of relationships that both require and provide mutual support and interaction and, therefore, by definition, they also share a need for community. The recognition of personal finitude and perceived loss of control that accompanies existential crisis shatters the illusion of invulnerability held by many and often leads to the surrender of self and circumstances to God (however defined) or a power greater than and beyond the self. The formation of a personal alliance with the Divine frequently generates a renewed belief in ones' abilities, and a sense of confidence, competence, and co-creation with God (god) that permits one to also regain a sense of self-reliance and control over one's life and future destiny. The sense of independence and self-reliance that is acquired from overcoming adversity in partnership with God (god) is, therefore, achieved through the admission of vulnerability and dependence on a power beyond the self.

The need for stillness, silence, and heightened interiority required for the development of self-awareness, sensitivity, compassion, and attentiveness to God (god) must be balanced with an externally focused presence, or attentiveness to others, and practical activities of daily life that are demanded by close confiding interpersonal relationships with and service to others. Contemplation of the Divine within, or immanent Presence, frequently leads to an awareness of the Sacred in all relationships and a sense of participation in the greater cosmos that may result in experiences of mystery and transcendence. Recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life often results in a sense of wonder, reverential awe, and gratitude that counterbalances the drive for independence and 'self'-actualization which, paradoxically, arises from surrender, 'self' sacrifice, and service to others. Although wonder, reverence, and mystery are thus important elements of spiritual transformation, they must also be balanced with practicality, in terms of living with and relating to others. Consequently, it is apparent that spiritual growth and metamorphosis is chiefly a matter of spiritual equipoise.

Personal Experience of Re-Integration

In keeping with the research design and completing the story of my personal experience begun previously, I began to reflect on the changes that had occurred over the past several months as we dealt with the aftermath of our lawsuit. As time passed, balance was gradually restored to my life and I was able to resume some of my former activities and reconnect with many aspects of my previous life; nevertheless, I knew that I was changed and had developed a new perspective on life. I would live my life differently as a result. The re-balancing of my life is a process of 'self' discovery and spiritual growth that continues to the present. The journey has taken time, and yet, the past year has truly been transformative in all aspects of my being; it has been, for me, a year of physical, emotional, social, and especially spiritual metamorphosis.

Physically, I began to regain my strength and my energy as publicity waned. I joined a gym to improve my physical stamina and try to release my stress through exercise. I could feel the tension drain from my body as I focused on working out and I no longer felt short of breath, as if I was suffocating. I could breathe freely again and my colour improved. I felt energized… alive. I was tired at night, but it was a different tired…a physical tiredness. I was able to sleep again…and even to dream. I felt more rested. I also began to eat more responsibly and to make healthier choices…and I began to lose weight. My blood pressure lowered and I no longer had palpitations. My heart rate and respirations returned to their normal levels for me. My energy increased tremendously and I began walking and enjoying the outdoors again.

Mentally, I started looking after myself, too. With rest and sleep came increased focus and clarity of thought. I began to look forward to life again and anticipated a future unmarred by such anxiety. I granted myself permission to engage in daily periods of solitude and reflection, time to consider the past, enjoy the present, and dream about the future. At the same time, I began to leave behind my feelings of victimization and to recognize that we are all subject to the foibles of being human and unable to avoid making mistakes – it is part of our human nature. I developed a new awareness that life is unpredictable, suffering is an inescapable element of humanity, and we are all vulnerable to random, or apparently random, traumatic events. Anxiety, fear, anger, and depression gradually ceded their supremacy as confidence, contentment, and happiness infused my being once again. I developed an increased understanding and acceptance of others and what it is to be human and subject to the vicissitudes of life. I began to laugh again. Family members said I looked happier, more relaxed, and younger, and I have much greater empathy for those afflicted with adversity. I am less judgmental, more accepting of others' behaviours toward me, and more willing to 'let things go', forgive slights, and focus on those matters that are most important to me in life. I have developed a new confidence and know that I can 'grow' through such challenges. Most of all, I have developed a new appreciation for life and am awed by the wonder and mystery of living. I have a new zeal for living now because I know that life is precious and relationships are everything…life is too short to waste on negative emotions!

Socially, I began to reconnect with friends and to look forward to 'coffee' and lunches out. I realize how valuable relationships are and am now more committed to being fully engaged in the lives of those important to me. I have developed greater empathy for others and am able to more fully share both the trials and triumphs of friends and family members. I no longer worry about what others may think and have greater confidence in social situations. I have become even more passionate about injustice, discrimination, lack of respect, and intolerance because I have felt the sting of vociferous, uninformed opinion, unwarranted negative remarks and criticism, unsolicited advice, and callous disregard for my own feelings and those of my family and friends. I enjoy my time with family and friends, and I believe I am a softer, gentler, more compassionate person who is more sensitive and attuned to the needs of those around me.

Spiritually, I realized that I need God, a power greater than myself, to guide and direct me through life…'self'-reliance would never be sufficient…life is beyond mere human control. I surrendered my life and being, once again, and my experience, to God. I knew, then, that I could survive this ordeal, although not necessarily without scars, and be wiser for the experience. I discovered that vulnerability can be liberating, because it allowed me to become more sensitive and open to the experiences of others. I learned to value my friendships more than ever and have developed a greater level of intimacy with both my husband and others that I am especially close to; I realize that relationships are what truly matter in life and am committed to more genuine and 'sacred' encounters of presence when interacting with others. I no longer feel isolated and alone, yet I value solitude and time spent in the presence of God renewing my spirit through reflection and/or creative activities. I am connected to the Divine and to others in a new way and awestruck by the mystery and wonder of life and the universe. Although I still wonder about why some traumatic events happen in life, I realize that questions are often unanswerable and must simply be tolerated…it is a part of human 'being'…and I can only trust that there is some meaning and purpose in the struggle to overcome suffering.

Although I cannot credit the lawsuit as the only factor in the many changes within my life over the past few years, I can say with absolute certainty that it was the precipitating event for the reflection and spiritual growth that followed. Although a long-time Christian, this event changed my relationship with God, with others, and with myself and, concomitantly, initiated reflection and transformation in all other dimensions of my life. Consequently, I have changed physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually…and the journey continues.

A Metaphor for Spiritual Metamorphosis

In keeping with the task of hermeneutic phenomenology, which is to preserve particularity while ultimately addressing the universal, and with my decision to use personal narratives, which embody both analytic and synthetic components to achieve the goal of enhanced understanding of the phenomenon of interest, I have chosen to use a poetic exemplar of spiritual experience as the compositive element of this investigation. The foregoing presentation of the thematic structure of spiritual transformation concluded the analytic component of this study and leaves only the "reintegrat[ion of] the part and the whole, the contingent and the essential" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 8), or the synthetic component to be accomplished. Consequently, I have written the following poem to illustrate the overall transformative nature of spiritual experience, while simultaneously describing the six emergent themes that comprise the essence, or core structure, of the experience. (See following page)

Metamorphosis

Turmoil, darkness, suffering, pain
Descent to hell and back again.
Alone and lost, in great despair
I cried aloft. I could not bear
the searing anguish in my soul.
No light, no hope, no longer whole,
A broken vessel...a shattered life...
a fear of facing endless strife.

Raging, cursing, pleading, crying,
Seeking, longing, begging, dying.

So alone amidst a crowd
Lack of feeling, like a shroud
entombs my heart and leaves me reeling
Lifeless form, devoid of feeling.
Cocooned within a private hell,
A lonely prison, a cloistered cell.
Untold questions free abound
Yet still perplexed, no answers found.

Withdrawing, asking, seeking, moping,
Reflecting, thinking, searching, coping.

Silent screams within reside
and cold and numbness too, abide.
A veil of tears, a misty haze,
Formless thoughts and endless days.
Cotton moments, foggy thought,
Robot movements, reasons sought.
Purged within of all delight
One long and dreary, dreamless night.

Wondering, waiting, wailing, weeping,
Wrestling, seething, numbing, grieving.

A cry to heaven, bereft of hope.
When deep within, my spirit woke.
A plea, a sign, a ray of light
pierced the darkness of my night.
A glimpse of God beyond the veil,
The hurt and pain begin to pale.
Beyond that suffering veil of tears
A flash of beauty rare appears.

Stirring, waking, glimpsing, seizing,
Hoping, praying, choosing, believing.

Surrendering all, my body...soul
Trusting He would make me whole.
Reaching out to touch another
        broken, wounded sister...brother.
Leaving behind my empty shell
Emerging spirit, here to tell
        of healing, warmth, a caring heart,
Of peace and grace, new life to start.

Surrendering, watching, reaching, hearing,
Emerging, moving, trusting, healing.

A flower faint, a face, a friend,
A touch of hope my spirit lend.
Treasured memories, prior hidden
        and sacred moments spring unbidden.
The pain a distant memory now
Behind, but not forgotten how
        I've changed and grown, some lessons learned.
My soul renewed, a calm returned.

Touching striving, changing, caring,
Connecting, praising, loving, sharing.

New heart, new mind, new life unfold
        with strength and love and joy untold.
A new creation, at last I've found
        a zest in being, no longer bound
        by suffering, torment, earthly cares.
At last at peace, my spirit soars
Transformed by fire and inner strife
I've now found meaning, purpose, life.

Living, listening, breathing, sighing.
Renewing, growing, soaring, flying.

Nancy C. Goddard

Chapter Five

All is mystery; but he is a slave who will not struggle to penetrate the dark veil.
Bejamin Disraeli

Summary, Implications, and Recommendations

The purpose of this research investigation was to explore, understand, and describe spiritual transformation as experienced by middle-aged and older women in the aftermath of significant personal trauma or existential crisis and extensive suffering. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to enhance understanding of the phenomenon, to develop a "rich" descriptive, textual account of spiritual experience, and to disclose and describe the implicit meaning structure as it emerged from the participants' accounts. The interactive exploration of spiritual experience by the researcher and participants led to the discovery of meaning within the participants' lived experiences and the formation of textual narrative accounts that illustrated the essential nature of the spiritual experiences. This chapter begins with a brief summary of the research findings and a description of the conceptual model developed to illustrate the thematic structure of spiritual transformation as experienced by the study participants. Implications of the research for the advancement of nursing knowledge and professional practice, as well as recommendations for future research, are also included.

Summary of Findings

The primary goal of this investigation was to discover the essential nature, distinguishing features, and internal meaning structure of spiritual experience as lived by the participants in the study. One of the criteria for participation was that, prior to experiencing spiritual growth and personal transformation, each woman had experienced some form of traumatic event or major life crisis that had resulted in a prolonged period of existential angst and suffering. After numerous readings of the participants' narrative accounts, several themes began to emerge and fall into natural clusters which were then labeled according to words and phrases used by the women to describe their experiences. Following the thematic analysis, a two-phase conceptual model of spiritual growth and transformation as a developmental process was constructed to illustrate the essential nature of spiritual experience as lived by these women. The first phase of the spiritual growth experience was characterized by physical and emotional turbulence and was described as a phase of *Dis*-integration. *Dis*-integration was marked by three distinctive periods during which participants experienced the 'end' of a previous lifestyle or way of being, were overwhelmed by questions of existence and meaning, and reached turning points where they recognized that life could be 'other' than it was; only then were they willing and/or able to move beyond their present circumstances. The three thematic periods of the *dis*-integrative phase were subsequently labeled '*Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection*', *'Questioning Being: Wondering and Searching'*, and *'Turning Points: Recognizing the Possibility of Other'*. Although discussed as discrete entities, the three thematic periods co-existed and movement back and forth between them was fluid, common, and non-linear.

The period of *'Falling Apart'* was a time of chaos, disorganization, and emotional turmoil; a period of suffering was begun that signaled the 'end' of a previous, often 'innocent' life as it was known. Suffering in this period was expressed through a variety of dissilient emotions, including shock, numbness, denial, fear, anxiety, anger, irritability, frustration, guilt, remorse, depression, despair, sadness, and a sense of alienation or isolation that frequently culminated in either a voluntary or an imposed temporary withdrawal from life for the purpose of reflection and introspection. *'Questioning Being'* involved wondering about existential questions and searching for meaning in the midst of crisis and existential angst. As participants faced the stark reality of existential finitude and were forced to abandon any illusions of invulnerability and control, they reached *'Turning Points'*, pivotal moments when they realized that life could be 'other' than it was and recognized that they needed 'Other' to cope with life. During this thematic period participants often described an 'awakening' of their spirits, a 'surrendering' of the 'self' to 'Other' or a greater power, and the 'experiencing of mystery' through a variety of sensory manifestations. At the heart of the *dis*-integrative phase of spiritual experience was a sense of spiritual woundedness that resulted in suffering and existential anguish. Movement into the second phase of spiritual experience, or the phase of *Re*-integration, hinged on an individual's willingness to make a decision to leave her 'old' life behind and move forward to embrace a 'new' and different future. Without the 'will-to-choose', one would remain mired in suffering, 'stuck' in a process of unresolved pathological grieving, and thereby risk continued personal destruction and permanent 'self' *dis*-integration.

The second phase of the spiritual growth experience was characterized by transcendence and transformational change and was described as a phase of *Re*-integration. *Re*-integration was also marked by three distinctive periods during which participants reached out to reconnect with some aspects of their former lifeworlds, learned to tolerate uncertainty and move beyond their traumatic experiences, and gradually re-created themselves, emerging as 'new' and transformed human beings with a more spiritual perspective of life. The three thematic periods comprising the re-integrative phase were labeled *'Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection'*, *'Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence'*, and '*Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation'*.

Throughout the period of *'Restoring Balance'* study participants demonstrated remarkable resilience and focused on reconnecting with life; they engaged in four categories of relational connections during this time, including connections with God (god), others, self, and nature. Relationships with God (however defined) were further characterized by the development of faith in a power beyond self and an experienced sense of immanent Presence. Relationships with others were characterized by intimacy, authenticity, and genuine presence, or the ability to be completely available to another with one's whole being, yet community was also a critical component of connectedness as well because human beings live their existence within a nexus of relationships. The ability to connect with one's inner 'self' involved reflection, introspection, and the development of increased self-awareness, which was critical for sensitivity and compassion to arise; consequently, solitude was instrumental for the development of self-knowledge. Finally, relationships with the natural world engendered a sense of participation in the greater universe and recognition of the interconnectedness of all life.

'Tolerating Uncertainty' involved a continued search for answers to existential concerns, although the nature of the questioning changed. Here the realization that random trauma and personal crises are inevitable and that suffering is unavoidable was coupled with trust that, even though answers might not be immediately forthcoming, there was some meaning and purpose to life that was, as yet, unknown to human understanding. Nevertheless, control over one's ultimate destiny was yielded to God (god) in the belief that, eventually, meaning would be revealed and one would be 'refined by fire' and emerge a "better" person for the experience. Such knowledge permitted individuals to move forward confidently into an unknown future, to 'let go' of the painful emotions associated with suffering, and to transcend their adverse circumstances. During the period of *'Re-creating and Changing Selves'*, participants began to embrace life once again, to re-design and re-create their lives, and to embark on a journey of transformational change. The admission that life was beyond absolute personal control and could only be 'controlled' in concert with God (however defined) led to the belief in 'self' and a new or renewed sense of confidence and self-reliance; as such, independence was only gained through dependence on 'Other' and interdependence with others. Recognition of the interconnectedness of all life was demonstrated by a sense of reverence, awe, and wonder at the beauty and mystery of life and was subsequently reflected in greater sensitivity towards others, empathy, compassion, forgiveness, an attitude of service, peace, joy, contentment, and a new appreciation of and gratitude for life.

Movement from the phase of *Dis*-integration to that of *Re*-integration, and movement through the various categorical periods, was accomplished over time and involved choices made by participants at particular turning points. Spiritual metamorphosis must, therefore, be viewed as a developmental process that occurs within the context of time. Many of the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data were initially seen as polar opposites; however, upon closer examination, they were found to be competing , yet complementary, human attributes and/or needs in a state of constant flux and continual re-balancing. The necessary tension created by these competing extremes requires that individuals reside in the 'space between' the oppositional demands. Examples of such polarities include the human desires for solitude and community, independence and interdependence, surrender and control, mystery and practicality, 'self'-interest and 'self'-less service, immanence and transcendence, and vulnerability and strength, to name only a few. Spiritual growth and metamorphosis was, thus, a consequence of living in spiritual equipoise.

Implications for the Advancement of Nursing Knowledge

Nurses have a professional, ethical, and legal obligation to provide spiritual care to their clients. According to Wright (1998), spiritual care involves helping individuals to recognize their spiritual potential, identify their spiritual perspective, develop their awareness of spirituality and its defining characteristics, and meet their spiritual needs. Therefore, the findings of this research investigation have numerous significant implications for professional nursing practice. The study contributes to the body of nursing knowledge by demonstrating the essential characteristics and transformative nature of spiritual experience. The discussion of the emergent themes and the conceptual model illustrates the developmental and temporal aspects of spiritual transformation, including its sensitizing antecedents, enabling, mediating, and inhibiting intra- and interpersonal factors, and its transformational consequences. The model also illustrates the transitional point, or point of personal choice, that permits possible movement from the phase of *dis*-integration and suffering to the *re*-integrative phase of spiritual 'self'-actualization and personal transformation. It is important for nurses to realize that a traumatic crisis that produces suffering and existential anxiety will often act as the primary stimulus for spiritual metamorphosis. By learning to be 'present' with and to support their clients through suffering and loss, nurses can ameliorate suffering and assist clients to move beyond their spiritual woundedness to achieve a greater sense of personal wholeness and spiritual well-being. A variety of interventions may be employed by nurses during each of the identified thematic periods to assist clients with their spiritual journeys.

Because the three thematic periods within each phase of spiritual development are parallel in terms of content, nursing interventions aimed at minimizing the effects of suffering and impelling individuals toward re-integration are described according to thematic content.

As individuals struggle with dissilient emotions and feelings of existential aloneness and loss in the midst of trauma and suffering, nurses can provide supportive physical and emotional care while also teaching that the spirit is resilient (Taylor, 2002). Simply creating a "safe place" for individuals to reflect upon, explore, and freely express their values and beliefs has been found to be an effective intervention in the provision of spiritual care (Van Dover & Bacon, 2001). It may also be helpful for clients to hear from nurses about others who have overcome suffering and found meaning in similar circumstances. If possible and feasible, it may be beneficial for clients to be introduced to an inspirational role model who can share how (s)he was able to transcend personal adversity. Nurses can also help clients to reflect on past challenges they have faced and learned from and to recall how they became "better" or stronger as a result of their experience. Such awareness may assist clients to gain courage and confidence in their ability to overcome and move beyond their current misfortune.

Relationships were also identified as a critical component of spiritual transformation and included connections to God (god), others, self, and nature, as previously noted. Discerning the values of greatest significance to patients, whether from obvious verbal and non-verbal cues or subtle nuances and less evident iconic clues will help nurses to understand and relate to patients and to facilitate connections with their sources of transcendent power, thereby also increasing their spiritual reserves. Faith was identified as an important element of spiritual experience and personal transformation in this study and referred specifically to relationships with God (god). Consequently, nurses can ensure that clients are provided the time, privacy, and materials needed to support their faith practices and/or rituals, as well as given permission to openly discuss their religious or spiritual beliefs, ultimate values and existential concerns or fears, and search for meaning in a non-judgmental atmosphere of trust, respect, and support.

According to Francois Mitterand (as cited in De Hennezel, 1997), while visiting a palliative care hospice he became aware that part of the preparation for death involved "excavating the bedrock of one's relations with other people" (p. 18) so that one could "let go" of life. Such an awareness of the significance of relationships must extend beyond imminent death to include situations of actual and threatened loss and trauma, as indicated by the findings of this study and supported by the literature. The recognition that relationships provide a source of inner strength and coping ability should alert nurses to the need to assess the quality and nature of interpersonal interactions, particularly during periods of extreme existential threat or situational crisis when facilitation of relational connections is paramount. Therefore, nurses must remain attuned to expressions of disrupted or stressed relationships so that they can assist their clients to restore relationships and achieve an improved level of health and personal well-being. Communities of participation, whether formally or informally constituted, provide a source of social support and foster a sense of belonging; deprived of opportunities for sharing and support, individuals are also deprived of a primary inner resource for healing. By fostering the establishment, maintenance, and/or restoration of interpersonal relationships, nurses may enable spiritual development to begin, enhance further spiritual actualization, and/or assist with spiritual transition into death.

The ability to connect with one's inner self often results from turning inward to reflect on one's circumstances, or heightened interiority, and is precipitated by suffering. Nurses can facilitate this process by encouraging periods of solitude and time with 'self' and/or nature. By encouraging reflection and introspection, nurses can promote increased self-awareness and 'self' integration in their clients. By engaging in personal reflection and introspection themselves, nurses can also increase their own levels of self-knowledge, a requisite attribute for "being present" with others (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Carson, 1989; Fish & Shelly, 1978). According to Lamendola (as cited by Cameron in O'Neill & Kenny, 1998), before nurses can address the spiritual needs of patients, they must be aware of their own spiritual issues because "when we slow down and listen, we gain the opportunity for self-examination and inner healing, which enhances our ability to be truly present to the spiritual concerns of those whom we serve" (p. 278). Often, it is fear that prevents nurses from being emotionally present with others who are suffering and leaves those in need of support feeling isolated and alone (Shuman, 1996). Fear arises from failure to acknowledge the possibility of future personal loss and existential finitude; consequently, reflection and self-exploration are critical for the development of self-knowledge and capacity for presence in both nurses and their clients.

Presence was consistently reported by participants and found in the literature to be an element of spiritual transformation, whether it was reported as being experienced or extended to others. Often, nurses can do little more than be with an individual in the midst of suffering, yet presence is one of the primary tools available to nurses for demonstrating care and compassion (Burkhardt & Nagai-Jacobson, 2002; Carson, 1989; Cameron, as cited in O'Neill & Kenny, 1998; De Hennezel, 1997; Fish & Shelly, 1978; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; Shuman, 1996). Being present requires a high level of self-knowledge, complete and focused attention that is oblivious to distraction, a sense of humility and shared vulnerability, active listening skills, and committed availability to another for as long as support is needed. True presence can only be achieved in an atmosphere of openness, trust, and safety, an environment in which a person feels comfortable and is willing to risk personal vulnerability. Nurses, therefore, must remain open and be 'present' to hear patients' stories of suffering so they can encourage disclosure and intervene appropriately. Cameron (as cited in O'Neill & Kenny, 1998) describes the steps of ethical or spiritual listening, as identified by Lamendola, a registered nurse and PhD candidate who specialized in the area of chronic illness and died from AIDS. Ethical or spiritual listening is a therapeutic intervention that involves establishing rapport, avoiding negative criticism or advice giving, encouraging self-examination, using non-directive communication, and promoting client integrity by supporting client decision-making.

Questioning the meaning of and searching for answers to traumatic crises are central to suffering and spiritual transformation. Because trauma and suffering are random and inescapable elements of life, they must be accepted and fully integrated into life for spiritual well-being to be achieved. When nurses see patients struggling with meaning they can assist them to explore the traumatic event and to develop new insights and ways of thinking. Taylor (2002) suggests that nurses often unknowingly convey messages that painful existential questions are discomforting and unwelcome and may inhibit clients' expressions of ultimate concerns. Questions of meaning may also be dismissed or denied by clients as inappropriate challenges of God's (god's) purposes or mentioned only peripherally in veiled language. However, since spiritual issues may emerge in an atmosphere of trust and respect or in a context of discussion, questions of existential import should be encouraged by nurses. Questions may be more readily recognized and tolerated by nurses who have also engaged in personal introspection and faced the challenges imposed by life. Pearson (1994) states that:

> Daring to ask the question oneself: 'Where is God in all this?' and grappling to find an answer which may remain elusive, one is far better prepared to sit with others who are asking the same question. There is less likelihood of repeating empty platitudes to assuage one's own discomfort, or of quoting scriptural verses which, though true, can deepen people's despair unless used with love, sensitivity and a sense of timing. Instead, there will be an openness to *not* knowing, to *not* having all the answers, yet being available as a fellow human being who is willing to be real. (p. 9)

The ability to tolerate uncertainty in the face of continued searching and questioning permits the possibility for a sense of wonder and transcendence to arise. By encouraging reflection, asking probative questions, promoting creativity, listening attentively, and being present in suffering, nurses can facilitate their clients' spiritual quests and help them ascribe meaning to their situations of adversity. Coward and Reed (1996) suggest that nurses can promote transcendence through a variety of intervention strategies aimed at facilitating relationships with others, encouraging altruistic activities, increasing self-awareness, and providing opportunities for clients to express their spirituality through meaningful personal activities. These activities lead to the expansion of an individual's personal boundaries inwardly, outwardly, and temporally and provide an untapped inner resource for healing. In a study of illness-induced transformation in breast cancer survivors, Taylor (2002) noted that participants ascribed meaning to their experiences by deliberately re-evaluating their personal values, re-considering their life's direction and mission, and determining to live with intentionality in the present, thereby also developing a profound appreciation for life and an intensified spiritual awareness. Self-knowledge, acquired through reflective introspection, and maintenance of a healthy perspective of oneself in relation to others and the world also helped survivors to find meaning in life. Nurses must, therefore, stress the importance of introspection as a means of achieving heightened self-knowledge and encourage clients to engage in values clarification exercises, pursue relational connections, participate in altruistic endeavours, and explore creative activities that will facilitate the ascription of meaning and promote spiritual development. Macrae (1995) offers nurses the following insight into spiritual transformation and possible therapeutic nursing interventions.

> What are the best conditions for the development of spirituality? What circumstances help to bring forth courage, compassion, inner peace, creative insight, and all the "God-like" qualities which, from the mystical perspective, are the inner essence of human nature? The answers to these questions are not completely known, Nightingale said, because adequate research has not been conducted. Following her line of thought, however, we can help our patients clarify: (a) the most valuable qualities they can bring forth from within; (b) the circumstances that are most helpful for the unfolding of these qualities; and (c) ways of bringing about these circumstances or best conditions into their lifestyles. (p. 10)

Finally, the value of narratives to communicate personal meaning and provide insight into human behaviour cannot be underestimated. Stevens, Hall, and Meleis (1992) emphasize the usefulness and significance of narratives for teaching nurses to recognize their clients' cultural beliefs, values, and experiences of meaning and state that: "Because telling stories about one's life is a natural means of communicating personal and cultural information, narratives can assist nurses in learning about clients' everyday experiences, priorities, needs, and goals" (p. 57). The simple recounting of personal life stories may be pleasurable for clients and precipitate insight into past behaviours that have been employed to successfully overcome challenging life situations. Sharing stories may also precipitate vicarious experience for others and provide the possibility for transcendence to occur. Ramsey and Blieszner (1999) suggest that people who are suffering may benefit from hearing encouraging stories from 'survivors' because they often generate hope and allow individuals to see possible alternative outcomes and develop confidence that they too can conquer adversity. Listening to stories has also been identified as an effective intervention strategy for learning about clients' needs (Baker & Diekelmann, 1994; Coward and Reed, 1996; Ramsey & Blieszner, 1999; Sandelowski, 1994; Stevens, Hall, & Meleis, 1992; Taylor, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). Therefore, nurses should be taught the value of listening to and learning from their clients' stories and must encourage clients to share their stories with others, particularly others who are suffering and/or in similar circumstances.

Recommendations for Future Research Directions

The conceptual model that has been presented reflects the internal meaning structure of spiritual transformation as experienced by the women in this study. A logical next step in the research process is for the proposed relationships between the various model components to be further developed and tested. However, before any measurement tools are developed, it will be important that the internal thematic structure and essential characteristics of spiritual experience be validated by additional research. Because personal transformation is primarily the result of changes in relationships and life perspective, the various types of relational connections herein described must be confirmed through additional investigative efforts using a variety of research designs such as hermeneutic phenomenology, ethnography, and/or grounded theory. The effects of suffering as an antecedent to and mediator of spiritual experience must also be further explored to determine its consequent effects on relational connections, on a person's search for meaning, and on experiences of mystery and transcendence. Resiliency must also be further investigated because of its potential to mitigate suffering and to effect spiritual transformation.

Most studies of spiritual experience have focused on palliative and/or elderly populations and largely ignored the experiences of men and/or of minors; consequently, it is recommended that studies of spiritual experience be conducted across the life span to explore the effects of age and gender on such experience. Additionally, since the underlying philosophical orientation of an individual can be expected to influence his/her experience of a phenomenon, the examination of spiritual experiences from a variety of cultural, racial, religious, and philosophical perspectives would also enhance the understanding of this phenomenon.

Although spontaneous spiritual actualization is evident in some literary contributions, most of the research related to spiritual transformation occurred in the midst of suffering or life crises, as was the case in this investigation wherein one of the inclusion criteria was significant personal threat or loss and suffering. Therefore, it is recommended that spontaneous spiritual experience and self-actualization be explored within a variety of non-critical situations and in contexts of health and well-being. Changes in 'self', behaviour, and life perspective following transcendent experiences must also be more fully investigated.

The conceptual model of spiritual experience and personal transformation herein presented is limited to the experiences of the study participants; however, further evolution of the model is anticipated as broader and more varied investigations are conducted. The findings of this study have relevance for professional nursing practice in that they offer a way for nurses to recognize suffering and spiritual woundedness in their clients and to assist them to make choices to move beyond their experiences to reach a new state of spiritual health and well-being. Nurses can help clients to strengthen or expand their coping strategies and inner resources through a variety of intervention strategies, as previously discussed. Each of the activities described provides a possible means by which nurses can stimulate and/or enhance the spiritual development and well-being of the clients they serve.

It is hoped that this investigation has furthered understanding of spiritual experience and personal transformation as a response to trauma and suffering and will provide insight to others seeking to explore this phenomenon in greater depth. It is also hoped that the stories of spiritual metamorphosis related by these women have focused attention on the importance of spiritual experience as a vehicle of change and provided a sense of vicarious experience through the attention to common themes and patterns of behaviour. Developing sensitivity to the spiritual experiences of clients is a complex task, yet it is an important element of holistic care and must be undertaken with diligence because it can alert nurses to client needs that may otherwise be overlooked. Spiritual experience provides a ground of inner strength for dealing with suffering and trauma and has the potential to effect a spiritual metamorphosis and transformation of the 'self'; consequently, to dismiss spiritual experience is to deny our holistic disciplinary ideal, to violate our moral imperative, and to dismiss a valuable resource for healing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A	**Information Letter**
Appendix B	**Consent Form**
Appendix C	**Participants' Critical Life Events Charts**
Appendix D	**Spiritual Experience Matrices for Study Participants**

Appendix A

Information Letter for Participants in Research Talks

Title of Research Project
Experiences of the Spirit: A Phenomenological Investigation

Investigator:	**Nancy C. Goddard, PhD (Nursing) Candidate** **Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta** **Phone: 1-(403)-347-5244**
Supervisor:	**Dr. Marion Allen, Professor** **Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta** **Phone: 1-(780)-492-6411**

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this study is to learn about what it is like to have a spiritual experience.

Procedure: Many people say that they have had a spiritual experience, but very little is known about what it is like. In this study I will ask you to talk about your spiritual experience. Our talk will probably last for about an hour, but it may end at any time if you ask that it be stopped. I may ask you if you would be willing to meet and talk again a second time if I need more information. You are free to say yes or no if I ask you this. I would like to tape record our talks, but I will turn the tape recorder off at any time if you do not want some of what you say to be taped. You may listen to the tape, or read the copy of our talk after it is typed, and if you want to add any more information or have some parts left out, I will do this.

Your participation: Findings from this study may help nurses understand what it is like to have a spiritual experience. Then, nurses might be able to help patients with their spiritual needs. This could also lead to better nursing care.

You do not have to agree to be in this study. If you choose to be in the study and later decide to drop out of the study, you may do so at any time. You do not have to talk about anything that makes you uncomfortable and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to.

Your name will not appear in any typed report of this study. If I write about you or something you have said, I will use another name that you have picked before our interview. During this study, only myself, members of my research committee, and the person who types the records of our talks will have access to the my tapes or records. All of the tapes, the typed records of our talks, my notes, and other written information about you will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. The tapes will be kept for at least seven years after the study is finished. If you agree, the typed records of our talks and my notes may be used in the future to do more research, if I receive permission from another ethics committee.

The results from this study may be used to write papers or at conferences, but your name or anything that could identify you will be taken out. If you have any questions about this study, at any time, you are free to call me or my supervisor at the phone numbers at the top of this page.

Appendix B
Consent to Participate in Research Interviews

Title of Research Project
Experiences of the Spirit: A Phenomenological Investigation

Investigator:	**Nancy C. Goddard, PhD (Nursing) Candidate** **Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta** **Phone: 1-(403)-347-5244**
Supervisor:	**Dr. Marion Allen, Professor** **Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta** **Phone: 1-(780)-492-6411**

The research procedures have been described to me to my satisfaction. My questions have been answered and I have received a copy of the Information Letter and a copy of the Consent Form. I understand that there are no harms or direct benefits to taking part in this study. I have been assured that all records relating to this study will be kept confidential and efforts will be made to safeguard my identity. I have been assured that I am free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from this study at any time. I do not have to give a reason for withdrawing from this study.

I agree to take part in this study.	YES	NO
I agree that Nancy C. Goddard may keep typed copies of our talks for possible use in future studies.	YES	NO

______________________________ ________________________
Signature of participant date

______________________________ ________________________
Signature of researcher date

……………………………………………………………………………………………

Please complete this section if you would like to receive a summary of the study when it is finished.

Name: ______________________________

Address: ______________________________
____
____

Appendix C

Participants' Critical Life Events Charts

Participants' Critical Life Events Chart

Participant	Age	Precipitant Event	Time since Change	Insights	Environment (Spatiality)	Time (Temporality)	Change in Self or Transformation (Corporeality)	Re-Connections (Relationality)	Moving Beyond or Transcendence
Gloria	73	Breast cancer	20 years (spiritual attack)	finitude immanence preparation well-being awakening healing of fibroids	spiritual attack while in hospital anointing with oil laying on of hands warning re: worn tires warning re: fire voice of assurance	faces, missing time gradual process of change	changed appearance (validation) speaking in tongues softer, less critical forgiveness, faith peace, well-being gratefulness, trust	surrender closer relationships with family/friends appreciation of life	no fear of death or return of cancer appreciation of life
Amanda	51	Death of son from SIDS	18 years (son's death)	immanence service attitude evils in world 'sinful nature'	fog / numbness, pain, fear, shock questioning spiritual attack vulnerability	gradual process of change, missing time	change in LOC vulnerability, peace, caring, assurance, faith, comfort, gratefulness, softer, more gentle independence	dependence on God immanence, power, presence deeper relationships	getting through and moving on
Hannah	39	Childhood sexual and physical abuse	4 years (mom/s death)	danger in life 'just as you are' finitude, purpose re-creation of self immanence self-discovery transcendence	presence in room hand on shoulder felt spirit leave (wind) transcendence spiritual introduction	searching instant awareness, then gradual process of change missing time dissociation from self	change from thinking to *feeling* – sensations hand on shoulder feeling music ecstasy and hell love, peace, trust, faith, forgiveness	reconnect with body trust, faith enlightenment no fear deeper relationships connection with self	no longer 'victim' forgiveness moving beyond past
June	57	Breast and thyroid cancer	14 years (diagnosis of breast Ca)	immanence healing of 'June', service to others	anointing with oil going through 'fire' 'hope' from sharing with others	anointed with oil prophecies gradual process of change transformation over time	healed spirit, if not Ca discovery of self recreation of self feeling of sun and wind made 'whole' sense of well-being, hope more energy, no fear	service to others, trust, peace, more faith, obedience, confidence, empathy, surrender, closer relationships, enlightenment	ability to go on enjoyment of life despite cancer
Anne	42	Childhood sexual and physical abuse Extramarital affair	26 years	immanence vulnerability omnipresence miracles occur embraced by God	shock, fear, questions awareness of 'other' possibilities transcendence hope sense of presence	initial awareness and gradual change transformed over time ongoing process	indescribable peace joy, contentment forgiveness love, happiness security, trust gratefulness	surrender peace closeness to God gentleness softness immanence	forgiveness moving beyond help through crises sense of purpose at 'One' with God

Participants' Critical Life Events Chart

Participant	Age	Precipitant Event	Time since Change	Insights	Environment (Spatiality)	Time (Temporality)	Change in Self or Transformation (Corporeality)	Re-Connections (Relationality)	Moving Beyond or Transcendence
Lynn	32	Alcohol / drug abuse and prostitution Childbirth	11 years (son's birth)	'good enough' for God' immanence recognition of Creator no use for religion "never alone" faced finitude	a 'clean break' part of nature wind and sun on face	orienting to the future missing time when on drugs and during abuse – few memories instant awareness, then gradual process of change a 'clean break'	shock of pregnancy learning to care for self. sense of personhood more independence love, trust, peace patience, no fear forgiveness of abuse strength	forgiveness of mother and of abuse reconnecting with family greater intimacy with husband more friends	at one with universe part of nature
Grace	66	Spousal abuse and major illnesses Stillbirth Divorce Death of Spouse	20 years (divorce)	spiritual partners awakening of soul immanence reincarnation angel visitor	'mixmaster' felt spirit leave (cold, goosebumps)	year single seemed an eternity instant awareness, then gradual process of change peak moment	no longer a victim aware of 'self' intuition, health independence double-edged sword happiness, joy, love, elation, resilience, trust co-creation with God, giving, optimism, gratefulness	time with second husband sacred reconnect with husband's children deeper relationships found essence of 'self'	left old life for new participant in life peak moment
Carrie	54	Death of Spouse and NDE	2 years (husband) 18 years (birth)	immanence 'no one road' faced finitude 'getting through' presence of angels	many questions about God – searching but always some sense of spirit a purpose in all this angel visitors	missing time after surgery – seemed like seconds gradual process of change	assurance of wellness spirit intact; more faith felt hand on back peace, trust, warmth, calmness, assurance, forgiveness, strength	more accepting of self and others more caring caring for others, forgiveness	peace and contentment trust in God that all will work out for the best sense of purpose
Marjorie	68	Attempted suicide and homosexuality	18 years (voice of God)	"pearl of great price" omnipresence immanence vision of angel voice in the light	attempted suicide in motorhome	turning point instant awareness, then gradual process of change development process	initial numbness 'joy', sense of worth trust, love (agape), zeal, exuberance, , zest, well being, exhilaration, forgiveness found identity change in desires	connections, relationships, forgiveness	left old life behind and set up ministries

Appendix D

Spiritual Experience Matrices for Study Participants

Table 1 – Gloria

Sensitizing Experiences:
Possible physical healing of fibroids – hysterectomy prevented (age late 20s) – first spiritual 'awakening' – "God had allowed this or healed me" (surprise, wonder –miracles and healing); power greater than self
Practicing organ for church – sensed and felt 'presence of the Lord' – began to play unfamiliar and unknown music (age early 30s) – raised more questions about God
Raised as a Christian – belief in God's existence and open to the possibility of healing

Falling Apart: Disillience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- Finding breast lump - diagnosis of breast cancer (1977) - shock - unsure whether 'bad' news or not – visit with friend and her reaction - supportive friendships from bible study group - mastectomy and experience of sheer terror – spiritual attack – recognition of evil - lost time 4-16 hours – 'in and out' – no sense of time – terror 'til after midnight - no explanation for experience	- sense of preparation (already a 'Christian') and assurance that things would be 'OK' - had already been involved in a ladies bible study – seemingly prophetic assurances from scripture, yet not sure why - receiving positive messages – "trust Me" - wondering and questioning this sense of preparation – openness/sensitivity to spiritual messages from scripture - realization that 'this is why' I've been prepared	- sense of future and 'what will happen next?' - recognition of personal finitude and temporality of life - praying and spontaneous experience of 'speaking in tongues' - surrender to Spirit – very religious experience (absolute joy, awe, reinforced faith, peace, confirmation of well-being) – God in control, so everything will be 'OK' - excitement over spiritual 'gift' - sense of immanence – "completely life-changing turning point" - assurance of well-being, although didn't understand 'why' at the time - laying on of hands - anointing with oil	- development of closer relationship with husband - closer relationships developed with family - much closer, more intimate relationship with God - appreciation for daily life - heard the voice of God in head r/t 'checking tires before trip' - heard the voice of God about moving a sideboard – fire -heard God's assurance of His presence – sense of peace and security (day after fire) – trust -"I am with you, sleep in peace" -sensitivity to God's voice and leading -assurance that God 'allows' these experience for a reason – not discouraged, despite frequent infections of arm	- no fear of surgery, just wondering what God would do next - sense of future and what would happen after - God in control – trust that all will turn out 'OK' - "Faith gets me through every day." - felt prepared to receive gift because of previous teaching by visiting pastor	- development of deeper faith - 'something' changed physically - "real changes began after I got home" – sense of real peace - physical changes noted by others (family and ladies in bible study) – 'something different', especially about eyes - change in attitude (more loving, caring, forgiving, concerned, softer, and less critical) - positive mental outlook - happiness, joy - appreciation for life – realization that life could end at any time – preciousness of life - recognition of temporal finitude - 'alive', grateful for life, appreciative, recognition of immanence, recognition of major spiritual shift and change - changed attitude and behaviours - no fear of death – assurance of eternal life, glad for every day - anticipation of eternal life, increased faith - short-lived sense of loss , a 'real deep sadness' about one year post-surgery and then, again, gladness and appreciation for life

Table 1 – Amanda

Sensitizing Experiences:
Raised Roman Catholic, attended church every week, religion from earliest memories
Summer church school, prayer, acceptance of God's existence

Falling Apart: Disillience and Disconnection	Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'	Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points	Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection	Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence	Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation
- left church (age 18-19) for approximately 12 yrs – knew God existed, but had left church - move to AB during 3rd pregnancy, with two young children - SIDS death @ 32 days - Feeling devastated – shock, panic, paralyzing fear, fog, numbness – physical sensations – throwing up, diarrhea, pain in face and chest - "left floundering" - fuzzy memories – lost, distorted time – several days - feelings of vulnerability and loss of control - 'fear is hellish', paralyzing – robs of all enjoyment of life - physical reactions – spiritual attack and fear for most of the year following son's death	- questioning God's existence when son died - "what is life all about?" - looking for purpose, trying to make sense - feeling of life-threatening vulnerability, existential anxiety - husband and kids 'not enough' – needed to find some meaning for experience, make sense - realized need for something/someone bigger than self - "I couldn't get through it on my own."	- gradual return to thinking about God's existence - re-awakening and experience of presence, immanence, and unexplainable peace – turning point – recommitment - recognition of lack of control – re-surrender and letting God take control - need for power greater than self – can't manage alone - submission to God	- went from not knowing to knowing again - gift of faith, but fear of losing others also persisted - God in control – trust that He is working all things for good - recognition of God's presence, even during times of fear – sense of immanence, power - changed relationship with God – increased maturity - reliance on God to help continue on in a life with dangers - reconnecting with God – sense of comfort - reconnecting with family - reconnection with church and other Christians - increased reliance on God – maturity of relationship - recognition that 'Jesus is enough' - closer relationships with others, greater understanding - healed relationship with parents - God is with me, *in* me - God is in all parts of my life – I am nothing without God	- everything all works for good if left in God's hands - life is a process of changing and becoming good - trust that God will provide healing and ability to move forward – God is in control - if things aren't what I want, or if there is any reluctance to do things, need to rely on God – He won't let me down - increased reliance on God - openness to the Lord's leading - trust that all will work out for good - moving on and leaving 'rubbish behind' – God provides healing and ability to move forward towards greater 'wholeness' – physical, emotional, and spiritual	- gratefulness for time with son before his death – gift of faith - sense of peace, presence, and joy, even during periods of fear - sense of immanence, presence, comfort, and faith - private to public relationship - scriptures empower life and lead to changes in self - trust, sustaining faith, vibrancy, openness, intensity, joy, zest, appreciation for life - recognition of 'fallen nature' – less critical, more empathy - increased understanding, forgiveness, and 'softening' increased tolerance and sensitivity to others - process of change and progress - growth, healing, and transcendence of situations - attitude of service to others - positive outlook on life - 'right' attitude, then distasteful jobs can be done joyfully (through prayer) – leads to blessings - feelings of forgiveness, joy, comfort, peace, presence, and faith - still healing and becoming whole - encouragement, trust, sustaining faith - personal growth in all areas of self and life

Table 1 – Hannah

Sensitizing Experiences:
Raised Roman Catholic – emphasis on religion and familiarity with scriptures, rituals, and practices – appearances important to dad (a 'look good' thing)

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**

- molested by brother (9 yrs older) from age 5 to junior high
- physical abuse by mother
- emotional abuse by mother
- very strict parental upbringing
- volatile relationship with mother
- ???denial of abuse by dad
- religion used to 'look good' and for control
- anger – grabs for attention
- verbal abuse (lazy, bad)
- sense of worthlessness from brother
- guilt – unable to separate what was being '*done to*' from what was happening
- living on own (age 18)
- very wild lifestyle – found acceptance with drinking crowd – dual lifestyle
- mother becoming ill
- no belief in self or abilities
	- why was this happening at home when, according to the church, it was wrong?
	- bought a plaque that said 'God's only law is love' – important, buy not sure why
	- searching for something – aware that lifestyle was not really working – feeling 'not good enough' for God – 'wearing a mask' at church
	- Series of events:
	  - 9 mo nephew with leukemia expected to die
	  - 1 yr old niece with undx CF expected to die
	  - explosion and fire in trailer (all occurred on same weekend)
	- questioning why family spared and why children ill
	- laying on couch praying, recognized need for greater power – searching for reasons
	- questioning why father died just as relationship was healed
		- met evangelical people with outreach focus who invited to church – raised consciousness
		- simultaneous widening of church circle of friends, but saying words by rote
		- dating and working with a Christian (God's hand)
		- discussion with missionary 'just as you are' – searching, joined bible study – series of events led to awareness of mortality and finitude
		- felt God's hand on shoulder – belief God was 'real' – spiritual *awakening*
		- shared with women at bible study – first attempt at trust
		- Christian counselor told to 'give it to the Lord' for healing
		- premonition of mother's death – felt mother's spirit leave her body (physical sensation of wind) – felt the 'presence of God' – turning point
		- "God had touched me that night, and I was changed"
		- sheer hell (anguish) and sheer ecstasy (God was 'real') – connection and surrender to God – "if for her, maybe for me…"
		- recognition of spiritual brokenness and lack of self-identity - awakening of spirit
			- connection with God
			- closer relationship with dad until his death in car accident
			- counseling started (1996) – recognition of dis-connection from spirit and body – led to recognition that 'God is bigger than all of this' – sense of immanence and constant presence
			- widening circle of church friends
			- closer relationships with family, and with kids
			- connection to 'self' through music, swimming – experiencing physical sensations
			- more connections with others
			- complete surrender and connection with God – power for healing and physical healing of cyst
				-questioning God when dad died from auto accident (1996) – heard the voice of God saying that 5 years ago was too soon – recognition of gift of time with dad and development of sense of purpose to life
				-realization after the fire that there was a purpose to all this
				-*future orientation* and wondering what should be doing in life – return to school
				-ability to move beyond abuse and life a significant life because of relationship with God – still some unknowns about future, but now looking forward to the future and changes in life
				-realization that brother's acts also shaped the good in me – changes in self, despite the awareness of the dangers and evil that exists in life – able to move beyond – able to move beyond and leave the 'bad stuff' behind
				-God has a *purpose* of our lives beyond what we know in this life
				-retrospective realization that God was there with me all along – learning to *trust* and *forgive*
					- process of change began
					- *developing authenticity* – dropping the mask – 'could no longer pretend'
					- peace over dad's death and recognition of temporal limits
					- process of healing from abuse, hurt, disappointments, and blame – woundedness
					- change from external LOC to internal LOC – from what others said to what I believed
					- change in self and locus on control – increasing trust
					- confidence, discernment re: trust, intuition – spiritual discernment r/t intellectual
					- getting to know 'self' – being made 'whole'; re-creating self
					- process of discovery, greater control, participant in life, energy and strength – prayer
					- confidence in self and abilities, enjoyment and appreciation of life, joy, sense of being really 'alive' – a 'participant' in life
					- increased sensitivity, empathy, compassion for others
					- nurturing self (swimming, reading, learning, crafts
					- no fear of death – assurance of eternity in a better place
					- process of growth
					- learning to trust
					- forgiveness of person, not act

Table 1 – Lynn

Sensitizing Experiences:
Some familiarity with church practices from time spent with mother's boyfriend

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- parent's divorce (age 2) - left Ont. to move to Manitoba - sexual abuse (age 4-8 ½) - began drinking (age 7) - move to Vancouver (age 9) - women's shelters with mom - physical abuse - move to Calgary (age 10) - shoplifting (age 10) - "I never had anything. I even slept on the floor." - marijuana use (age 13) - alcoholic blackouts - cocaine habit (age 14) - life as a hooker and junkie (age 14-17) - partying with numerous gangs - multiple attempts at suicide - detox center (age 17 ½) to 'clean up' enough to find painless way to commit suicide - partying and doing drugs with mother – 'shooting up' again - back on the streets (age 17-19) - hooking in rough area of city - detox and rehab (age 19) – last few months, no veins so mainling in neck - needed drugs to be a whore - mainlining drugs in neck	- wanting to die - saw others from the streets while in detox - wondering if detox could really work - desire for something different	- recognized the possibility of another life - development of hope and the possibility of a future – 'awakening' to self - "I thought, well, maybe this could work - from detox to treatment - admitted abuse to counselor - reaching out to counselor and signing up for treatment in Ponoka – able to resist temptation when preparing to leave – a clean break from past - turning point - "spiritual awakening" instantly with birth of son	- connections to others in rehab - counseling for sexual and physical abuse - attendance at AA meetings – beginning of change in self - met future husband in AA – "he saved my life" - connection with future husband - opening self to share with him - reaching out to other women - birth of son led to recognition of Creator and recognition "my life didn't have to suck" - surrendering life to Creator - commitment to another – marriage when son 4 mos old - connection with self - reaching out to other women for advice about motherhood - complete surrender and commitment –immanence – "God is constantly with me" - God said "hey, you're my child- you are just fine the way you are" – closer connection to God - appreciation of relationships - feeling 'part of' nature - closer to God and nature - moving to Ontario to reconnect with family and biological dad - closer relationship with husband - sharing, intimacy, trust, love - appreciation of precious 'gift' of kids, family relationships - learning to care of self – quit smoking, saving for vacation - pets (guinea pigs, bird, fish) - reconnect with father	- developing hope and an interest in the future - unexpected 'unreal' pregnancy after being clean and sober for 8 months – questioning 'why' because 'scarred' from sexual abuse and told could not have children - "So for me, it was just phenomenal… being pregnant". - blow up with mom – led to forgiveness and acceptance – a change in self/relationship - job, saving money - new intimacy with husband - recognition of continued struggle and journeying as part of change process – trust in God - looking forward to future - recognition of finitude influences approach to life and relationships with others - anticipating future life in a new province - no fear of death	- recognition of abilities - sense of gratefulness for life - gaining strength / confidence - increased independence - feelings of safety/security - "I felt loved" - changes in self – feelings of unconditional love, warmth, protectiveness, prayer - learning to care for self – nutritionist, reading, menu planning, breastfeeding - beginning to 'feel like a real person' – further changes in self (no heavy metal music) - acceptance of past, forgiveness of mother and boyfriend - patience, responsibility, love, independence, commitment - increased self-assurance, self-awareness, responsible parenting, self-control - nurturing – friends, music, pets, nature, biking, faith - greater independence, trust, love, strength, enjoying life - continued process of change and spiritual growth – changes in approach to life, sense of well-being, immanence, love, peace, companionship - spiritual experiences daily – looks for sacred in mundane - strength from faith, nature - "feeling alive" - sense of peace and personhood - depth of relationship with kids

Table 1 – Grace

Sensitizing Experiences:
Raised, schooled, and married Roman Catholic – religious background
Child born (age 37)

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'	Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points	Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection	Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence	Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation

- divorce from 1st husband after 25 years (1977) – emotional distancing, especially after surgeries
- stillbirth of first child
- death of 2nd husband after 8 yrs of marriage (1987) – age 54
- married 3rd husband (1990)
- separated/reunited after nine years – married 11 years
- dad's death in 1967 (age 34)
- within five years (1971-1975)
  - delivery of daughter at age 37 (1969/1970)
  - complete hysterectomy
  - bilateral mastectomy
  - reconstructive surgery
- left RC church
- loss of femininity: "I'm just a shell. I'm not a woman. I'm just a shell"
- strained relationship with mother
- social isolation and discontent
- 2nd husband's illness (bypass surgery, dialysis) and death – loss of period of time after death – stress, "fuzzy"
- mother's stroke and coma
- move to Canada
	- dad's death @ age 34 led to first serious questioning 'why?'
	- searching for meaning (1971-1975) – new baby, surgeries, marriage breakdown
	- no sense of 'self', left RC church over dilemma of birth control
	- given 'Science of Mind' pamphlet by art teacher – spiritual awakening (1975) – metaphysical orientation of church – beginning of spiritual change (like a starving person at a banquet) – turning point
	- began searching for sense of 'self'
	- actively seeking God, or a power beyond self
		- recognition of possible 'other' as missing from life
		- found 'Religious Science' church and attended
		- surrendered self to God and 'found' self (1976-1978) – commitment to church (1978)
		- before "connected to God" felt a *victim* of circumstances
			- connections with others through church – felt welcomed
			- social isolation in mountains, yet maintained connections with church members back 'home'
			- 2nd marriage a 'sacred' time of spiritual growth, healing of relationships, loving, giving)
			- gift of 'time' with 2nd husband – a peak moment at his death
			- healed family relationships
			- reaching out – volunteering, and reconnecting after husband's death
			- began dating – 3rd marriage – a spiritual partnership
			- separated and reunited with 3rd husband – ups and downs
			- development of greater trust in God – sense of immanence
			- reconnecting with daughter and ex-husband
			- recognition of God in others – common thread of God
			- complete trust in God 'no matter what happens, it will be OK'
			- more meaningful and deeper connections with others – 'never meet a stranger'
			- healed relationships, reconnections with others
			- complete trust – God knows what I need – He has a plan
				- seeking and taking classes in 'Science of Mind' theory, even after move to mountains
				- continued taking classes all through second marriage
				- love and peach during period of separation
				- vision of angel – most spiritual experience ever – a 'heavy' experience - moving
				- sense of purpose to life
				- need to share lessons learned in life with others
				- everything is in God's hands, He has a plan – reliance and trust
				- felt 2nd husband's spirit leave his body – feeling of coolness, chills, overwhelming sense of peace – 'out of body' sensation, felt like a 'different consciousness'
				- double-edged sword (pain and relief) – 'a beautiful closure – completely within spirit'
				- "OK, honey, here comes the mix master" – puts it on high speed – another lesson to be learned
				- purpose in life is to learn and to teach others
					- development of intuition, creativity, essence of 'self'
					- happier, sense of worth
					- increased independence, job
					- recognition of personal worth
					- changes in self – finding 'me'
					- change from being a 'victim' to being in control – sense of personal responsibility
					- able to make personal decisions, spiritual growth
					- learning to love 'self'
					- love, absolute joy, peace, happiness, self-reliance
					- love peace, continued growth
					- trust, peace
					- continuous unfolding process of change and spiritual growth
					- development of sense of 'self'
					- sense of co-creation with God
					- change in LOC from external to internal – absolute peace
					- peace, happiness, joy, love, 'up', optimistic, positive outlook, sharing, giving, self-aware, introspective, 'grace'
					- no fear of death – eternal, continuous life in another dimension
					- sense of immanence, 'one with God, trust
					- nourishing spirit (spiritual reading, quiet time, soft music, listening to soul, inner-talk with God, sensitivity to God's leading meditation)

Table 1 – Carrie

Sensitizing Experiences:
Raised in religious home, familiarity with scriptures and prayer

Uncle's death raised initial questions of belief
Vision of deceased uncle saying everything was 'OK' (age 13)

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- becoming ill (1981) with gallbladder tumour, twins one year old - fear of this surgery – previous two C-sections, yet worried this time only - surgery (1982) – difficulty breathing a few days post-op (dismissed by surgeon) - discharged – developed 'rash-like' reaction at home – readmitted to hospital - pulmonary emboli (platelets 3800) – seriously near death	- searching and questioning during teens, as a result of uncle's suicide ('awakening') - questioning how God could turn his back on 'someone so good' because he had committed suicide – "one strike and you're out" - vision of uncle - "I just couldn't believe that anyone could say that somebody who had been so good was going to hell" - 'why now?' when illness developed and death was near - questioning what faith is all about - questions about God and the purpose of life	- vision of 'angels' – appearance of dad, brother, and 'angel' (clearly described) – "this can't happen now – I have young kids at home" - vision was prophetic – initial fear and recognition of personal finitude – assurance that they were there to 'watch over me' so everything would be 'OK' - assurance "I'm going to be all right" - translucent being and sense of being 'watched over' by all three during transfusion - presences brought assurance, peace, warmth, calmness, strength, and re-assurance - re-awakening, re-commitment, and re-surrender to God as a result of experience	- recognition that I didn't bleed so long – confirmation that I would be 'OK' - renewed relationship with God – no worries – presence and immanence - renewed importance of relationships/connections with others (students, co-workers) - building deeper and more meaningful relationships - closer connections with God - greater reliance on God to meet needs and 'lead' - closer to family - deeper relationships with others - an attitude of care toward others	- expected complete healing physically – did not happen – now has developed diabetes, hypertension, asthma, and thyroid disease - yet knows God is in control - emotional and spiritual healing, even if not physical healing - became 'whole' when placed trust in God - injury and disability at work, yet God knows – trust in God - struggling with adversities, but security and knowing that all is being done for good – trust - knowing there's a reason - realize there's a point/purpose to all of this suffering	- renewed positive mental outlook - increased faith - trust in God to provide needs - more prayer, open to leading - peace, warmth, calmness, and assurance/sense of purpose - sense of immanence - more accepting, forgiving, accountable for decisions, trust - less feeling of being 'done to' and greater accountability for personal decisions - no fear of death, assurance of eternal life - broadening of faith, increased strength, nurturance of self – quiet, peace, music, walks won't hold onto anger – grudges prevent building of relationships - positive attitude toward life

- husband's MI (1986) – angioplasty – a 'warning'
- many death's past two years, as forewarned
  - brother-in-law
  - husband
  - brother-in-law's mother
  - uncle by marriage
  - sister-in-law's mother
  - cousin and her mother – both diagnosed with ovarian Ca within four days of each other
  - cousin's mother
  - cousin's wife
- husband's death (1998
	- time just 'disappeared' when dad and brother visiting during illness		- closer relationship with God – 'gift' of 12 years with husband
			- improved relationship with God
			- learning to become a 'whole' person after being a 'couple' when husband died
				- prophetic experience – we would not be left as orphans 'now'
				- vision and touch – brother-in-law who was deceased (1 mo after death)
				- prophetic experience of family members' deaths
				- wondering about husband and what we would do
				- sense of meaning and purpose – continued searching for reasons for suffering - helps provide a positive attitude toward life
				- knowing things are working out
				- auditory experience of husband reciting song about freedom
					- continued growth and change, despite continued grieving
					- deeper faith/sense of meaning
					- discovery of emotional and spiritual 'wholeness', despite continued grieving
					- sense of peace, assurance of well-being, all will be 'OK'
					- comfort, reassurance, and peace following auditory experience
					- increased breadth and strength of faith – more than one road to God through spiritual journeying
					- greater trust
					- sense of spirit intact, at peace

Table 1 – Marjorie

Sensitizing Experiences:
Familiarity with bible and with scripture (as punishment for stuttering)
Vision of Jesus in the window (age 18) – prophesy of coming to Him later in life
Hearing about God from a couple of 'partners'
Realization that there was some kind of spirit in a person, but that God was 'out there' somewhere

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- parents unmarried / discord - #4 of 4 daughters - unwanted by father (treated as 'son', 'retriever') – no name - unwanted by mother (treated as 'the thing') - no historical name identity - name – lesbian rel'nship - mother gave away – sense of worthlessness and insecurity - witnessed mother's rape - sense of vulnerability - vow to be a 'gentleman' - no security or identity - abandoned by mother in ditch - mom's suicide rejection by grandmother - stuttering and humiliation – wearing dunce cap and reading scripture in corner - series of lesbian relat'nships - dual life as 'Roger' > 40 yrs, yet real 'lack of' identity - fired for homosexuality - loss of partner of 8 yrs – "you're not enough" – distress, insecurity, rejection, sense of inadequacy - isolation from gay community - spirit was dead (unrecognized) - gender confusion "somebody messed up" - attempted suicide - searching for partner rejection by organized religion (first church attempt)	- encounter with compassionate nurse (age 14) - first attempt at church – 'Jesus could heal anything' - desire for 'other' (rejection) and for identity - 'Are you for real?' - questioning God's existence – realization of greater power - (awakening) - second attendance at church (3 wks after suicide attempt) – 'last chance' - searching for healing - questioning/searching cont'd – did not attend church immediately - possibility that God was 'out there'	- encounter with God during 'suicide' attempt – heard God's voice 'banging' in head – realization that God might be 'real' - newspaper ad – church page - significant sermon - responding to invitation at church (reaching out) - testing God – 'if you're really real' – send someone to help - prayer for help from someone - brought 'brokenness and lack of identity' r/t homosexuality - conversion experience – finding identity in relationship - God - connection to others - opening of self – vulnerability – possibility of healing, love, and confidence – open to change - surrendering to God - openness, biblical teaching - surrendered brokenness and lack of identity, fear of rejection - belief and development of trust and faith - promise of deliverance and freedom – "God can and will deliver you and set you free." - belief in God and fear of rejection - promise of deliverance and freedom	-welcomed into church – making connections with others -development of faith -sense of connection to God -biblical teaching -sense of immanence -rel'ns with God and others -surrender to God -hearing voice of God and realizing God was in the light, even in childhood -1st praise for Roger – letting go -surrender of male identity (with counselor and at monastery) -intimate connection with God -healing and connection -vision of angel – open to hearing from God -identification with Christ -practicing the presence of Jesus – two way relationship of hearing and listening -more solid, deeper, and more meaningful relationships -sacrifice and surrender of self – complete healing -"put off the old" (carnal man) and "put on the new" (spiritual man) – transformation of 'self' and new identity as a child of God – relational identity -in touch with the divine – relationship -sense of immanence -intimate connection with God	- still lonely, search for inner healing - 'how did I get into this mess?' - realization of wounding as a child (mother's rape) – healing from pain of memory - listening to God's voice – re: moves and beginning ministry - obedience to God, wherever He leads – openness to leading - move to US and back to Canada - retrospective recognition of spiritual nature – 'bringing to life' – rebirth and resurrection - promise of future relationship - openness to prophesy when mess was given 'in tongues' with no interpretation - openness to leading of Spirit - "we're spiritual beings whether we acknowledge God or not" - ability to move beyond present situation by accepting healing - surrender and control	- developing faith - acceptance, love, openness to receiving love, connection, faith, personal rel'n with God - healing of pain from childhood and increased faith - vision of being freed from chains– deliverance from desire – acceptance of healing (laughter, exhilaration, sense of freedom, and ability to move beyond the present situation – healing) - increased faith and security as a child of God – assurance of love and healing began - became 'alive' in Christ -vision of change in gender (pearl) and sense of worth – discovering female identity– homosexuality 'extracted' and new identity 'deposited' -inner healing, surrender, love, openness to change, joy - change in self – joy, healing exuberance, zeal, well-being, entering the fellowship of suffering – forgiveness - fully alive – zest, zeal, love, fervency, joy, exuberance, well-being, agape love - completeness and fulfillment - healing of childhood wounds and development of faith - continuous growth over time - spirit controls attitude

Table 1 – June

Sensitizing Experiences:
Attended charismatic church (unbeknownst to mom) – married a Christian and attended church with him – 'Sunday Christians' – early *belief*, but not a priority in life

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- parental divorces x 2 (age 3 yrs and in teens) - anger over divorces - strained relationship with mother - brother's death (1992) in auto accident - strained relationship with sister - brother-in-law's death (1992) from MI, 3 wks after brother - finding breast lump – no mammogram done "you're too young" to get cancer - diagnosis of breast cancer (1986) at age 44 - simultaneous diagnosis of thyroid disease (goiter) - 'horrific' biopsy experience - preoccupation with diagnosis – fear, a wake-up call - facing radiation and chemo - radical mastectomy with positive nodes - thyroid cancer (1994) at age 52 - recurrence of thyroid cancer (1996) at age 54 - desiring and praying to quit smoking - hemorrhaging (hysterectomy done) – no cancer found	- searching for higher power to help quit smoking – praying in desperation - "God was preparing me for this happening", for what was to come - recognition unable to do this on own - biopsy done – 'why now?' - fear, recognition of personal finitude - questioning 'why?' - searching for answers – began attending bible study – purpose becoming clearer - seeking options - seeking release from fear and wanting answers – went to church for laying on of hands prayer, and anointing with oil	- experience with 1st prophesy (Deuteronomy 28: 1-14) about 'obedience' and its blessings - 'spiritual awakening' following anointing with oil at church – opening self to 'Other' - 1-2 days after prayer and anointing, incredible sense of peace, feeling of well-being, ability to go on – God became 'real' – no real belief prior - surrender to God – turning point – beginning of healing of 'self' - physical healing of ulcers	- relationship with God - reaching out to others increased - connection with church and with other Christians - palliative care visits - visiting and sharing with others - open to God's leading - sharing faith at Christian school - developed relationships with kids from the school - relationship with God and self - all trials 'allowed' to give opportunities for sharing - all work for 'good' - reaching out and developing relationships with high school girls – ministry - identity is in God – this is His plan and all things work for good (mine or someone else's) – complete surrender and trust - importance of prayer life as connection with God – everything begins with prayer - sensitivity to leading of Spirit - closer relat'nship with husband - increased relat'nships with teens, friends, husband, God - no part of my life that doesn't include God - "Everything is part of God's plan for me or for someone else – or He may also just want to take me home"	- developing hope - orienting toward future – plans for helping others - uncertainty about prognosis - sense of purpose and faith - 2nd prophesy (Hebrews 11:6) about faith, witnesses at church - finding new meaning in life and sense of purpose - put through fire for a reason - 'embrace whatever comes your way because something miraculous can transpire' - complete trust that God knows what is best and that He is 'recreating me' in spite of the cancer – a magnificent process – becoming the person God intends me to be - cancer is part of everything I am now – God is in everything – trust, sense of immanence - retrospective recognition of preparation for what was to come – stopped smoking instantly when diagnosed (preparation of body), given a hobby of photography (preparation of mind) to cope with situation, prophesy re: obedience and going to church elders (preparation of spirit) – wholeness and healing of 'self', regardless of condition of cancer - everything fitting together - given me ability to 'let go' and move on – purpose to life	- changes in self – increased humour, healing of ulcers - gradual increase in control and decreased fear and anxiety - confidence in ability to make decisions, development of faith - sense of fulfillment - continuous spiritual growth and increasing faith / trust - given photography hobby - gradual spiritual growth changes in self (confidence, faith, renewal, self-fulfillment) - continuous change (faith, trust, confidence in life, self, God, renewal – all healings) - fully involved in life - becoming the person God intends me to be, prayer - re-creation of self, new meaning in life, empathy - enlightenment, deeper faith - no fear of death – assurance and anticipation of eternal life - ministry with high school girls (sharing faith, praying, sensitivity, love) - continued transformation in life – incredible peace - scar is a reminder of complete surrender of my life to God - healing of 'June' – wholeness, whether or not cancer is cured – 'OK' – a full life - strength from scriptures - appreciation for life - incredible peace about life

Table 1 – Anne

Sensitizing Experiences:
Some familiarity with religious dogma in later childhood from time spent with older sister.

Falling Apart: Dissilience and Disconnection	**Wondering and Searching: Questioning 'Being'**	**Recognizing the Possibility of 'Other': Turning Points**	**Restoring Balance: Resilience and Reconnection**	**Tolerating Uncertainty and Moving Beyond: Transcendence**	**Re-Creating and Changing Selves: Transformation**
- Illegitimate child - Married young - Husband lost job - Financial problems - Extramarital affair - Near death of teenaged son - Parental chronic illness - Death of brother-in-law	- questioning and searching after move when lonely and just after first child born - realization that life goes beyond self and revolves around others – need to give of self to others - older sister talked about need for salvation	- recognized possibility that God might exist and asked into her life because she "could sure use some help" - became aware of spirit - age 24 - "OK, God. If you are there… if you exist, then I could sure use some help down here, you know, getting my life on track"	- believed God entered life at this point but didn't really *experience* His spirit/presence - instantly felt that God's spirit had entered life during baptism -sense of spiritual well-being -felt welcomed at church	-God is in control of everything -Trust that God is in control no matter what else is going on -Dependence on God -Experienced the spirit of the Lord during baptism – sense of happiness, joy, peace, and contentment	- Sense of peace, presence, and contentment as long as in right relationship with God - Trust, joy, love, inner peace, faith, contentment - Warmth, gentleness, softness, security, cared about - Sense of well-being
- Move from small town to city - Feelings of loneliness		- turning point - baptism - complete "giving over" of self during baptism – age 31	-sense of family and fellowship -connection with God after affair led to forgiveness	-Reliance on God rather than self	- Peace and assurance that I'd be OK
- Affair – anger, bitterness, hatred, resentment - Blew world apart - Life was coming apart	- pleading and bargaining with God after husband's affair - closed self in bedroom + cried - closed self off	- invited to church	-sense that God understood -reliance on God to change self -not a superficial relationship – very deep	-forgiveness and ability to move on in marital relationship -trust that God is in control, even when things are bad	- Able to forgive husband and move beyond the situation - Prayed that God would change me and help me through (prayer/scripture reading)
- Sons' illness – fear, panic, agony, restlessness, guilt abandonment, agony, turmoil, confusion, - Guilt over "drifting away" - "if my relationship with God was right" – agony, turmoil - "couldn't think"	- realization that relationship with God had suffered from drifting away - angry at God for not changing husband and sons (religion) - begging God not to let son die - questioning what life was all about	- recognized inability to control life by self - recognized need for God – for something or someone greater than self to rely on and help through life - complete surrender and giving over of life to God	-re-surrendered to God when son ill and realized she could not control life and needed God to be in charge -God provides strength, hope, intuition, and balance as well as unconditional love	- -doctors had no answers -no one knew what was wrong -sense of purpose to life -"I knew God healed him – He healed my son"	- Softness, peacefulness, gentleness inside - Long, slow process of change - Intense love and peace - Inwardly happy and joyous - Ability to forgive - Sense of strength
- inability to communicate - panic attacks, insomnia - anxiety, heart pounding, awakened with start - angry at God for not giving faith to husband and sons - dissatisfied, agitated, unsettled	- recognition of lack of control over life without help - sense of vulnerability - wondering "if God was trying to tell me something"		-abiding presence within – always there -"sixth sense" that guides me -"His arms wrapped around me" -"He knows me inside and out" -need time in His presence -private, personal, intimate relationship – sacred	-doctors couldn't understand why the tumours were shrinking -mysteriousness of healing -feel so free that nothing else matters at the time	- Faith grew - Indescribable peace and contentment - Assurance that things would be okay with God in control - Warmth, gentleness, calmness - Happiness, contentment, peace, security, love, and feelings of being cared for
- "Please God, don't let him die" but that's all I could say			-"just 'know' I'm in God's presence and wait in silence -relate "heart to heart" with God		- Thankfulness for my life